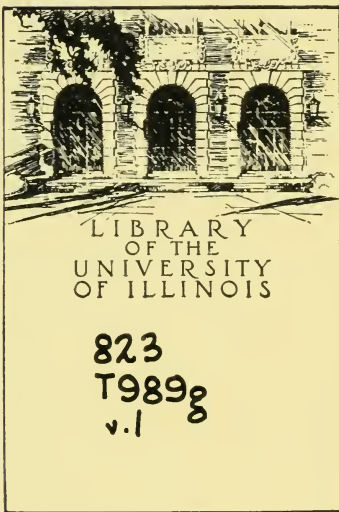


GRISEL ROMNEY.

BY JAMES H. HARRIS.

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GRISEL ROMNEY

GRISEL ROMNEY

A Novel

BY

M. E. FRASER-TYTLER

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I.

"So young and so untender?"
"So young, my lord, and true."

KING LEAR, *Act I.*




London:

MARCUS WARD & CO., 67, 68, CHANDOS STREET

AND ROYAL ULSTER WORKS, BELFAST

1880



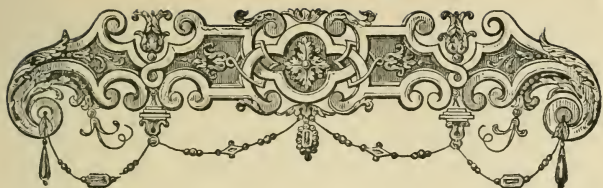
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GRISEL ROMNEY.

CHAPTER I.

SUMMER-TIME.



OVER the lawn, down into the beechwood, the sun was streaming. The grass looked brown and hot till it lay in the cool under the beech trees, and there, forming itself into mossy cushions round the old stumps, temptingly invited the public to come from out of the blazing sun into the shade.

So the Romneys interpreted it, as they came sauntering over the path with rugs, books, and work, prepared for a long afternoon out of doors.

"We must not go out of sight, Sybil. Let us sit near the swing tree. Reggie is sure to find us there; he said he was coming this afternoon to say good-bye."

"Poor La Grise could not go without Le Gris

coming to wish her good speed, could she? Well, it is only fair she should have her way to-day. Do not you think so, Bryde?"

"Yes," rejoined Bryde. "We are your humble servants for to-day, La Grise, but it will be a very different thing by this time next year. Then you will be only the youngest of three grown-up sisters, instead of the spoilt baby just going to school."

"Never mind about next year, Bryde. Perhaps I shall get my own way as much then as now."

"Perhaps you will not—unless it be from Papa or Reggie. Sybil and I will not be the least the same. You will be only one of three," and Bryde by no means looked as if she could be superseded in the trio.

Bryde was the acknowledged beauty of the family—tall and slight, nut-brown hair, glowing complexion, soft brown eyes, that could sparkle both in fun and anger when need be. She seated herself now at the foot of the old beech tree, determined to be comfortable.

A father, one son, and three daughters—such elements composed the family of Romney, of Romney Manor, in a hunting county in England. Sybil, the eldest, aged four-and-twenty; then came the son, at present at Oxford; then Bryde; and last of all, Grisel, commonly known as La Grise, Grisette, or any other *soubriquet*—the pet of the

family—on the eve of going to school for a year, before appearing on the world's stage as a "come-out" young lady.

She looked very much the reverse at the present moment. The school to which she was going would need to be of a most developing type, to turn the childlike being into a woman in one short year's time. Perhaps it was because she was so very *petite*, and so very full of fun and life, and so utterly without any knowledge of the world, that the said world would never have given her credit for having very nearly attained her seventeen summers.

Sybil was sketching in water-colours—making a study of a neighbouring beech tree. Bryde was lazily knitting a stocking for her brother Tom, raising her sleepy eyes at intervals to watch Grisel, who, lying on her face on the grass, was trying to induce Snipe, the terrier, to sit still while she tickled his ears and nose with spikes of grass and twigs.

Snipe could not see the fun, being much relieved when his tormentor, tired of the amusement, turned her attention to her sisters.

"Do you think you have forgotten nothing, Sybil? Are you sure that you have not left out some small trifles, that when I arrive at Miss Tufton's I may not have to borrow various little necessities, such as slippers, or boot laces, or——"

"Or knives or string, or a racquet and balls—that's much more in your line, La Grise." The speaker was a young man somewhere about twenty, who, unobserved, had come upon them suddenly.

"Oh, Reggie, you dear old thing, is that you? I said I was sure you would come. So now you must make yourself useful, and give me a swing; you know it is my last for a long, long time."

"For a long, long time," repeated Reggie, mockingly. "Will you please to remember that when you return to your father's roof next year you will be grown up? It will be quite impossible that you should then care for such childish pastimes."

"We shall see when the time comes. Sybil, will you give Reggie Papa's message?"

Sybil looked up from her sketch. "Will you come and dine with us to-night," she said, "as it is Grisel's last night at home? Do you think your mother would spare you?"

"Thanks, Miss Romney, I fear we have friends at dinner to-night; but I shall try and ride over to-morrow morning."

"How horrid of you to make an engagement for my last evening! You needn't trouble to come to-morrow, as you could not keep to-night disengaged," exclaimed Grisel, pugilistically.

"All right, Grisel. Perhaps as I would not keep to-night disengaged, you would rather I did not stay this afternoon. Good-bye, Miss Romney; good-bye, Bryde," and, without a glance at Grisel, who was covertly watching his movements, he walked off briskly.

"Well, Grisel, are you satisfied?" Bryde asked, composedly.

"Oh, perfectly, thanks. I am going for a walk. I do not want anyone to go with me."

Reggie's whistle was still heard from the direction in which he had gone. He did not seem to be making rapid progress in his homeward journey. Grisel at once made up her mind. She would run by a cross cut and intercept him, as if by accident, before he could leave the park. Having gained her station before anything was seen of him, she sat down to recover her breath, and waited impatiently. She planned the scene. How he would look so glad to see her, and she would be just a little bit dignified at first, and then she would forgive him, and they would have a long afternoon together, with lots to do and to say.

The same thing was enacted three or four times a-week. Reggie, the only child of Sir Roger and Lady Mainwaring, had always been Grisel's constant companion. As children, the one was rarely seen without the other, and after Reggie had

attained an Etonian age, the holidays were looked to with as much delight as the half-weekly holiday in the old days. At last the time came when Reggie went up for his army examination, and receiving, after the proper amount of delay, his commission, the Romneys had seen but little of him for two years.

He had been home for a month's leave now, and the old intimacy was at once resumed. Grisel, absolutely refusing to consider herself anything approaching to a young lady, was allowed to be constantly with him. Mr. Romney saw no harm in it; she was such a child.

To go back to Grisel awaiting Reggie's approach.

She was perched on the top of the stile commanding a good view of the surroundings, but her tormentor was nowhere in sight. The whistling sounded horribly stationary, and her patience was getting exhausted.

Two dainty feet tapped impatiently on the top step of the stile, and two tiny hands were pulling a crimson rose to pieces, the leaves falling in a shower, forming a pleasant piece of colour on the otherwise snow-white figure. "Is he coming? Is he not? Is he coming? Is he not? Only a few more leaves to pull. Coming? Not! Coming? Yes! here he comes at last!"

"Why did you hurry so, Grisette? I gave you

plenty of time to take it quietly, and still meet me here."

"You didn't *expect* to meet me here, did you? I thought you would be so surprised and——"

"And what, little lady?"

"And pleased," with just the tiniest pout curling the rosy lips.

"Did I say I wasn't pleased? Come, child, we must not fight our last afternoon. Let us go down to the river, and I will row you up as far as the island, and then we shall come slowly back, in time for me to ride home for dinner, which is not till eight o'clock."

"What about afternoon tea? I should hate missing that!"

"Well, perhaps that is a serious consideration; but still, don't you think you might forget about it for one day?"

"Oh, I couldn't possibly forget it; but I might try and not mind very much."

"All right, then; let me lift you down."

"No, thanks," and she sprang past him on to the grass. The two turned down one of the many paths which led to the river. Laughing and chattering gaily, they reached at last the boat. Grisel at once jumped in and took her seat, while Reggie went to the boat-house for the key to undo the boat from her moorings. He returned shortly,

and then swiftly and pleasantly they glided up the river.

All along the banks the wood crept down to the water's edge ; at intervals streams came to add their contribution, ferns and creepers forming an exquisite undergrowth, the many winding foot-paths looking singularly inviting for exploration. Still they held on their way, Grisel's school anticipations amply supplying conversation. When the island was reached, every corner must be gone over and said good-bye to before Grisel could make up her mind to turn homewards. At last they were drifting down the river. Grisel, sitting idly in the boat, had resigned her oar ; Reggie, just opposite to her, watching her quietly, wondering what sort of a woman she would make, wondering over whom she would cast the spell of her marvellous fascination, which even now as a child had so much power over him. Would he ever be able to teach her to forget their brother-and-sister intimacy ? Grisel, all unconscious of his gaze, was amusing herself with a pile of pebbles she had in her lap, trying to hit the flat water-lily leaves, so temptingly spread on the water at the river's edge.

At last she broke silence.

"I wonder how long it will be before we have another row on the river ? Do you know, Le

Gris, I think I shall keep a calendar, and cut off the weeks as they go past. Do you think it would make the time seem shorter?"

"Do you dislike the thought of school so very much, Grisel?"

"Oh no! I dare say I shall like that part of it; only I hate leaving Papa and dear old Sybil and Bryde. And then there are other reasons. I shall miss our nice afternoons together, and, you know, perhaps we may not meet again for years if you go out to India, and by the time you come back you will have grown quite old, and not the least inclined to devote your time to a child like me. You would think it nonsensical to spend an afternoon at the swing-tree!"

Reggie sat watching her; an amused expression came over his face as she spoke.

"Did it ever occur to you, La Grise, that if we are not to meet 'for years,' that you will be a woman by that time, and that, perhaps, you may not then care for our long afternoons together? You will have other pursuits and other friends."

"What an absurd boy you are, Le Gris. Now listen to me. To begin with, I am not seventeen yet, and girls don't become women for ages—oh! at any rate not until they are twenty-five or thirty. Secondly, there is no fear of me getting to think our afternoons stupid, because I have been accus-

tomed to them from a child ; I might as well think it stupid to be with Sybil ; and, last of all, I don't wish new pursuits and new friends. Are you satisfied now ?”

“Not exactly, child ; however, never mind, it is not your fault,” he added, as he saw a shade coming over the questioning face opposite to him. “But it is really not so bad as you make it out to be ; there is no chance of my going to India for two years yet, and you are to be home—when ?”

“In the end of next June. Oh ! dear, such a long way off.”

“Well, then, the time will soon pass, and I will tell you what we shall do. I shall get my mother to give a ball in honour of the coming out of Miss Griselda Romney. It shall be the day after you come home ; I shall get leave and be at it, and that will be the next time we shall meet, my queen. Do you think you will promise to give me the very first dance ? I shall wait at the door for you, and you will dance with no one till you have danced with me ?”

“Of course I will give it to you, and as many more as you like ; you know I shall know no one, and I will be very grateful to you for taking notice of me.”

“Do not speak like that, child. You will know

far too many people, and may be sorry you made the promise."

"Certainly not by that time, Reggie—my very first ball. Do you really mean it? Do you think your mother will not mind? Oh! it would be too nice. I wonder what I shall wear. I wonder if you will remember your promise to dance with me the very first."

"I'll try to do so," he said, laughing at her earnestness. "We are very near home now; shall we turn back for a little?"

"No, we cannot do that. Sybil will think I am lost. How lovely it is! How much I wish I were not going away!"

Slowly Reggie piloted the boat to the edge of the stream till it lay by the side of the small stone pier. Grisel's hands were full of ferns, which stopped her usual mode of disembarkation, and required a more cautious procedure. Reggie sprang on shore, but Grisel sat still, gazing wistfully round, unwilling to take the good-bye look. At last she rose with her ferny burden.

"Let me take them from you, child," he said, with a strange tenderness in his look and voice. "Such tiny hands for so large a burden!"

In taking the ferns, he took one of the childish hands in his, and raised it gently to his lips.

"How odd you are to-day, Le Gris! You stupid boy, you never did that before."

The colour had crept over Grisel's face, her soft grey eyes looked with a strange, questioning wonder in them; but Reggie had turned suddenly from her, and was re-mooring the boat.

"Never mind, my queen; you will forgive me for saying good-bye so."

"Yes, I forgive you," she said; "but it was very odd."

So they wandered up to the house, and were met with laughing questionings as to their disappearance; then Reggie left, and the sisters spent a busy evening finishing the last touches of Grisel's outfit.

Next morning a party on the platform of the wayside station waited for the train. Mr. Romney was going with his daughter; Bryde and Sybil and Reggie Mainwaring were there to see the departure.

They are in the carriage at last, good-bye has been said, the train is moving off, and a laughing face is put out of the window.

"You will not forget it is to be the very first dance, Le Gris?"



CHAPTER II.

AN ACCIDENTAL MEETING.

THE Scotch express was just starting ; the platform at King's Cross presented the usual scene of bustle and leave-taking. Porters stowing ladies' arks into seemingly impossible holes, small portmanteaus flung in to fill up the corners ; the guard, civil and obliging, passing from carriage to carriage, promising owners of the arks compartments all to themselves, with the usual reminder of "I go only as far as York." It is but a delicately insinuated hint that this world expects a substantial acknowledgment of its works of supererogation ; but it is a shame to say such a thing of railway porters and guards—they are the most obliging race on the earth.

The day was brilliant, but cold. December was not far advanced, and as yet no great fall of snow had confirmed the prophecies of a severe winter.

Walking sharply up and down the platform to

gain a certain amount of circulation before starting was an elderly gentleman, accompanied by his daughter; a cockaded footman and lady's maid guarded the door of the carriage, where an extra supply of hot-water tins were being deposited.

"My dear, we have got no papers yet. What is George doing that he is not buying us papers? I never saw a worse travelling servant. Here, boy, I want to-day's *Times*. What else have you got? Take your choice, Lenore. You had better get the *Graphic* or *Illustrated*; it's better for you than that yellow-backed trash."

"Thanks, papa; I have made my choice."

"Eh! what have you got—not that bigoted and reviling *Saturday*?"

"Why not? It amuses me, and that is the chief end to be gained in railway travelling."

General Sir James Fenton had once suffered from the weekly Review, on which he had since expended all his superfluous bitterness. "Take seats, all going north. Tickets ready, please."

A few minutes' confusion, the ticket inspector had passed the Fentons' carriage, and Lenore, with her head out of the window, was watching the final arrangements. Suddenly, from the far end of the station, a slight increase of hurry, a man, enveloped in Ulster, deerstalker, and huge fur collar well drawn up, came rapidly down in the direction

of the express. "Take seats, all going north," repeated the impatient guard. A moment's delay; the stranger, whoever he was, jumped into the smoking compartment next the Fentons; a port-manteau and hatbox were thrown into the attendant luggage van, but not before Lenore had noticed the large "H." on both articles; and they were off, flying past the suburbs of the metropolis, with the delicious sense of speed and getting away from the trammels of civilisation.

Lenore sank back luxuriously into her corner by the window, first removing her plummy beaver hat for a more comfortable soft tweed one. Sir James rubbed his spectacles, preparatory to a long and thorough investigation of the news.

"I can't stand this sort of thing," he grumbled; "I can't abide wandering about visiting. It puts one out of one's beaten track. Country houses in December!—the idea is preposterous. What am I to do with myself all day? I don't hunt, and there will be nothing else to do. Men coming in fit for nothing after dinner! Where's the use of it all?"

"I dare say it won't be so bad as you think. I shouldn't fancy Mr. Wyld was much of a hunting man. I have no doubt you will find he will be delighted to have a game at your beloved *ecarté*."

"*Ecarté*!—*ecarté* is not everything. You women

always jump at conclusions. It's the whole life ; it's the air you breathe, the rooms you inhabit, the food you eat. Even the men you meet are of a different stamp. The whole life is on a wrong principle. Where's your pleasant Continental freedom ?”

“It's not too late to return yet, Papa. I am fond of the sunny South. You know it was your own wish to try how you liked a home winter. Suppose, after our visit to Hurst Manor, we go back direct to Pau ?”

“My dear, you seem to think I am made of money. It's not like a single, independent man ; remember I have paid already a fortune for luggage, and your maid, and the man. Plans are not so easily upset as you seem to think.”

There was no oil to be thrown on the troubled waters, so Lenore raised her paper with a semblance of reading, and her father, with a continued grumble, rattled and crumpled his *Times* into proper dimensions.

He was really not so crusty generally, and was very proud of his handsome daughter. He glanced at her before settling to his reading, and almost made some excuse for his temper ; but it was fully borne in on him that it was unwise policy to renew a discussion with any woman, which prevented him acting on the impulse.

Lenore, in her corner opposite, was not a disagreeable picture for any man to regard.

Leaning back, as she now did, certainly was not conducive to showing the rounded lines of her figure. Her hair was coiled simply round the back of her head, which was exquisitely set upon her shoulders. The delicately-cut nose, sharply-pencilled eyebrows, and mouth and chin in which were seen so much determination and power over self, were hardly in keeping with the large, dark, dreamy eyes that some day in the future might not sleep so quietly as now. Her well-shaped ungloved hands lay idly on her lap; there was about her that indescribable air of good breeding always so attractive in woman.

She fell into a pleasant reverie as the train rattled on, a retrospect of the last two years. It seemed a much longer time ago; only two years since her father arrived at the fashionable Brussels boarding-school, six months before he was expected, and had told the mistress of the establishment that he was tired of his lonely life, and must have his daughter with him. He would give her a fortnight to make her preparations, she must be suitably fitted with a wardrobe in keeping with the only child of a man supposed to be of large property, and a maid must be found of unexceptionable belongings. So in fourteen days' time

Lenore found herself to have undergone a complete transformation. From a carefully guarded school life she suddenly became her own mistress. With no woman near of kin to turn to, she learnt to trust entirely in herself. She did not miss companionship as another would have done ; she had plenty of resources in herself to fill the vacant hours, but the life they led did not leave her much time to grow weary. On leaving Brussels, they had spent the following six months in travel. Sir James wished his daughter to hold her own amongst the wanderers with whom they associated. Then a winter followed at Pau, and as the spring came on, and the tide of humanity turned northwards, the Fentons followed in the stream, and found themselves wandering from one fashionable watering-place to another.

The life suited Sir James ; he liked the freedom. Homburg, Baden, each in turn. There was always the Kursaal with its reading and card rooms, and if at times Lenore thought with longing of a settled home, she put it from her ; it would not please her father—her one object in life.

A second winter was passed at Pau ; they had come to be considered *habitués* of the place. A second summer at the German baths, and now, at last, they were in Britain, the first time since Lenore was thirteen, when, at her mother's death,

her father being absent on service, she was placed at the Brussels school.

They had spent a month in town on their first landing, but November is certainly not the month to choose to visit for the first time the city of the world, and Lenore, accustomed to years of foreign skies, was disappointed ; in the gloomy streets, the smoke-laden atmosphere, she could find no resemblance to the city of her dreams. She was thankful when a pressing invitation from old friends of her father led their steps northwards still. They were to spend Christmas at Hurst ; then, probably, some more visits in Yorkshire would follow ; and there was a talk of the London season, and Lenore being presented in the following spring.

But the next fortnight was all that was as yet decided on, and on this visit she spent much speculation. Mrs. Wyld had written, telling her that the house was to be full ; there were to be theatricals, a small dance, and varied merrymakings — a charming picture for a girl who knew nothing of the delights of country-house life.

Sir James's temper improved as the day wore on, and as they neared their destination he employed his time in pointing out the various landmarks of the county he had known so well as a boy.

"There is no more charming county," he said.
"You will see something worth seeing if you will

keep your eyes open. Dear, dear, what an old man it makes me, coming back again with a grown-up daughter! There, now, you see that rising ground on the horizon? Those are the woods of Hurst. We are very near our journey's end now."

If speed of going signified it, they certainly would soon come to the end. They were passing through a winding part of the line with rolling country all round. Suddenly, as they approached the last of the wayside stations, the brake was put hard on, checking considerably their speed, but it was not in time. Only as they rounded a corner did the engine-driver perceive that a single goods waggon had become detached from several standing in a siding, and was on the up line.

The Fentons were in the third carriage from the engine, but had no idea that anything was amiss. Lenore being interested in the passing objects, Sir James in pointing them out, they were hardly conscious of the diminution of speed.

"You will see better from this window, Papa. Now, look, what is that we are passing?"

Sir James was on his feet, and Lenore had scarcely finished speaking, when the smash came. First the tremendous concussion, then the carriage leapt from the rails, and was thrown violently over on its side.

Lenore was conscious of nothing for a few

seconds ; she was stunned with the force of the shock. Her father's voice recalled her to herself.

"Are you much hurt, father?" she asked, raising herself with difficulty to a sitting posture.

"My leg is broken, my dear ; I cannot help you."

"Don't move," she exclaimed. "I will try and call for assistance. Some one will be here directly."

She managed, with some contrivance, at last to raise herself to the window, and a scene of anxiety and confusion met her gaze.

The two carriages in front of them had been much broken, and the occupants of the latter carriages in the train, who had not suffered from the collision, were engaged in extricating the sufferers.

"Can you help me?" she called out. "My father is very much hurt."

Her voice attracted the attention of two men standing near. One of the two was their fellow-passenger from King's Cross. He turned at the sound of her voice, and hastened to their aid.

"Let me help you out first ; we can then more easily render your father assistance. Give me your hands, and I will promise to get you out safely."

She raised her hands confidently, and placed

them in his, but drew back with a sharp exclamation of pain as she felt the strain on her wrist. "I think I must have hurt my arm," she said feebly, turning very faint and white; but with an effort she recovered herself.

"Never mind; I will try again."

"I am very sorry, but I fear it is the only way," her deliverer answered; another effort, a sharp spasm of pain, and she was released.

The two servants, white and frightened, had just extricated themselves; neither seemed to be hurt, and were hurrying to their master's and mistress's assistance.

"But you have hurt yourself, mademoiselle; and where is Sir James?"

"Not much hurt myself, Amelie, but I fear Sir James is." Lenore was rendering what assistance she could to the three men, and in a few minutes Sir James was lying on the bank; he had fainted from pain, and Lenore, in despair, bent over him. She dare not turn her eyes, lest she should encounter some of the piteous sights with which she was surrounded.

"Have you any idea how far we are from Hurst?" she asked, turning to her new friend. "I am such a stranger here, and so utterly helpless, I do not know what I shall do."

"Do you mean you are going to Hurst? If so,

will you let me render you such assistance as lies in my power? I know the Wylds well, and though I am not going there—my destination is only a mile beyond—would it not be best for me to hurry there, and get them to send for you? or,” he continued, seeing Lenore’s colourless face, “perhaps it would be better for me to stay with you, and I can give your servant instructions so that he could find his way?”

“I would be thankful if you would stay. I feel so helpless. What should I do?”

“I think if we were to remove your father to a cottage that is not far distant, he would be more at his ease.”

The man-servant was despatched to The Hurst with a message on a slip of paper. Lenore watched the business-like hand as it traced the short, clear account of what had happened, and the bold signature imprinted itself on her mind, “Jack Hunt.”

“There,” he said, brightly, “that will bring help. Now, Sir James, you are feeling better, are you not? and we are going to move you to a cottage near this. We must make some kind of a temporary stretcher; you will suffer less, moved so.”

Workmen were busily engaged removing the *débris*, as the down train was expected. Most of those who had suffered from the accident were

being taken to the neighbouring farm-houses. There seemed to be no fatal case. The engine-driver and stoker were very badly hurt ; they, too, had been removed. The Fenton party were the last to leave the ground.

Sir James bore the moving better than could have been expected ; and, after an hour of weary waiting, The Hurst carriage arrived. Mrs. Wyld had sent all necessary appliances to make the drive more bearable. When seated in the comfortable carriage, her father in comparative freedom from pain beside her, and Amelie regaining her composure opposite her mistress, Lenore began to feel a return of her old curiosity as to the people into whose house she was so oddly now to enter. Mr. Hunt absolutely refused to go in the carriage. He preferred walking to the station, where he expected to find his friends had sent for him.

“ We shall meet again to-morrow or next day, when I shall hope to renew my acquaintance under more favourable auspices.”

They were met at the door by Mrs. Wyld. Her husband was from home for the day, and she, full of anxiety, awaited their approach. Lenore was charmed with the kind and genial manner, by the warm welcome she received. The doctor had been sent for, and had just arrived. Sir James was at once removed to a bright room on the ground

floor, where he could receive constant visitors from the adjoining library and other public rooms. In another hour the painful operation of setting the broken bone was over. Mercifully, it was but a simple fracture, and Lenore, having had her wrist bandaged, was lying down in the bright, fire-lighted room, resting before dinner.

Presently there came a tap at the door, followed by it being opened, and a gentle voice, "Are you asleep, or may I come in?" It was Mrs. Wyld come to inquire after her visitor's comfort.

"My husband has just come home, and has gone to sit with your father. I thought I might come and have a chat, and so begin our acquaintance in this, to me, witching time of firelight."

"I am so glad you have come," said Lenore, rising to do the honours of her room.

"Now, do not move, or I shall leave you. Lie still where you are, and tell me about this miserable accident."

Lenore graphically repeated what she knew and what they had experienced, dwelling but for a minute on the collision itself. Her nerves had received a shock. She could not yet feel calmly about it.

"Then your fellow-passenger from London was no other than Jack Hunt? What a mercy he was there! What a strange introduction to each

other! You will see a good deal of him while you are here. He is one of the men I depend on most entirely for my theatricals."

"Who and what is he?" asked Lenore. "I could not make up my mind as to which of the four professions he belonged. The church and medicine were cut off, but after that I was puzzled."

"He cannot be said to belong to any of them. He is a literary man, and is the editor of a leading journal. He has travelled a great deal, is made a great deal of in society—in fact, he is a universal favourite."

"I don't usually care for universal favourites," laughed Lenore; "but still there may be exceptions."

"As to who he is," continued Mrs. Wyld, "that is a more difficult question. I never heard him mention any of his relatives' names. I believe his mother died when he was a child, and his father, having quarrelled with all his friends just as Jack was growing up, left this world for, we hope, a better one; but he had not improved his son's path of success in life. Poor Jack had a hard fight for some years with poverty and living down his father's prejudices; but he is getting on well now, and I am sure you will like him. He is the life of every party he is at, and is in continual demand; but he works hard, and it is only when he takes a

few days' holiday, as in the present case, that there is any chance of catching him. I tried to secure him for ourselves, and, on finding him engaged, was only too thankful to hear he was to be a guest with the Suttons. But you will be tired of Jack Hunt. My husband calls him my own particular. Let us turn from him to yourself. I want to hear all about your movements for the last two years."

So the two ladies talked on, cementing their friendship. They were reminded of the passing of time by Lenore's maid arriving to dress her lady for dinner. Mrs. Wyld rose to go.

"I am so distressed at all this trouble we have brought on you," said Lenore.

"I am too thankful, dear, that it happened near. We are such old friends. You surely need not regret making this a passing home. We are alone to-night, so do not trouble yourself with dressing if you are tired."

So began Lenore's country-house life.





CHAPTER III.

THE BEGINNING OF IT.

TWO heroines in a book are generally looked on as a mistake, and yet how can this story otherwise be told? Fascinating and dainty Grisel must be left at her school, and the reader must with patience trace yet a little of Lenore's history.

A fortnight has passed since the day of the accident. Sir James is going on well. Lenore still wears her sling, but she has promise of speedy release.

The party has been growing gradually in size. The Hurst has at last packed in all it can hold. It is Christmas-eve, and in the old oak-lined library a merry party is assembled. The fire is blazing brightly. Old suits of armour catch the glow, and reflect it again in steely flashes. The curtains are not yet drawn; outside, one can still distinguish that the earth is covered with a snowy

pall. In the corner by the wide chimney is the tea-table, at which Mrs. Wyld is presiding. All around are grouped a chattering and laughing assemblage.

The question on the *tapis* is the following week's festivities. How will there be time for all the learning and rehearsing of parts when so much else is to be done? Mr. Wyld and one or two of the elder men are in Sir James's room; only the youth of the party are collected in the old library.

"You are really too good, dear Mrs. Wyld; you take so much trouble with it all," softly coos fat little Mrs. Dacre. Her two daughters, in a gentle undertone, also let their tones be heard. Fair-haired girls, of good temper and good looks, indispensable in a household of mixed multitude. "Mrs. Wyld thinks of everyone," the first gently murmurs. "She is far too good," the second continues. A pasty-faced young barrister endorses the sentiment. The rosy countenance of the youngest Miss Dacre has secured his everlasting admiration.

"Has anything definite been agreed upon at all?" asks Miss Jerningham, in her quick, decisive voice. "We seem to be much where we were when we began."

"Augusta is always in such a hurry," broke in

Miss Jerningham's brother Philip ; and the young barrister contrasted her unfavourably with the docile and ox-eyed Miss Dacre.

"I am inclined to agree with you, Miss Jerningham," said Mrs. Wyld. "If we are really to have our theatricals on Monday, there will be no time to lose. I wish my right-hand man would come. We can arrange nothing till then."

"We might at any rate fix which parts we are to have," again suggested Miss Jerningham. Her powers of organisation were largely developed. What more fitting field for their display? "Mr. Hunt cannot settle everything. Whom do you propose to take the leading woman's part in the play?"

"That I do not know," answered her hostess. "Either yourself or Miss Fenton. There are various tableaux to be acted. Mr. Hunt has selected them, as I wished them to be all from Shakspeare."

Lenore, who until now had not spoken, looked up as her name was proposed. "I would much rather not act," she exclaimed ; "that is, unless you wish it very much."

No more was said ; the conversation flowed on, and Lenore relapsed again into silence. She was sitting on a low stool in the large chimney corner. Her head rested against the sidepost of the mantel-

piece, and the firelight flickered on her face, and lighted up the dark brown velvet and the quaint old lace at her throat and wrists. Though silent, she was not an inattentive listener, her parted lips and changing expression told of the interest she took in the discussion.

The room and its occupants made a perfect picture, as seen from the outside through the long window-door which opened to the garden. Up the path leading to the house, between the old close-cut yew hedges, the figure of a man enveloped in an Ulster was fast approaching. The gravel sounded crisp under the tread of his sharp foot-step; a bright spark of light and a fragrant whiff told of the cigar between his lips.

It was too good a one to throw away—he stopped outside the window, and watched the scene within. He had been once or twice at Hurst since the day of the accident, but had both times missed seeing Miss Fenton.

It was the first time he had seen her without her hat; the change was even for the better.

With the eye of an experienced manager, he took in the conflicting elements which he was to blend into a harmonious whole.

“Where shall I find a Titania?” he thought to himself. “Not one there who would do. I dare say Mrs. Dacre would consider either of her daughters

capable of sustaining the part ; but they must be used up in the witches scene in 'Macbeth.' Miss Jerningham will make a royal Lady Macbeth. And no lack of men for minor parts. Now for the last. Who shall be Juliet ? Miss Fenton is cut out for it. But where is a Romeo ? Are any of the men fit ? No. We must think of some other part for her. I cannot have her spoilt by an unworthy Romeo ?"

The cigar was finished ; he went forward to the window and knocked.

"Ah ! here comes my trusty bulwark at last. Captain Stanley, will you let Mr. Hunt in ?"

The man addressed by Mrs. Wyld crossed the room and raised the sash of the window.

"We are all at sixes and sevens, Mr. Hunt. We require your business head. Have a cup of tea first ?"

"Thank you, yes. Are all my troupe collected ?" he said. "Let me see. How d'ye do, Mrs. Dacre ?" A general handshaking, and the chorus of voices increased. Jack Hunt crossed over to where Lenore was sitting. She thought she was unnoticed—she had withdrawn into the shadow.

"I may consider myself introduced," he said. "We seem quite tried friends."

Lenore flushed with pleasure at the recognition

in the dusky room. What was it in this man that so attracted her?

"Yes; friends in misfortune are on a common footing," pleasantly remarked Mrs. Wyld.

"It was more of a friend in need, wasn't it?" said Lenore, forgetting her usual reticence.

Jack Hunt gave an answering glance of sympathy; and Miss Jerningham broke in impatiently—

"We must really come to some understanding of our parts. Mr. Hunt cannot expect us to know them without."

"I stand corrected, Miss Jerningham. Let us to business with what speed we may."

"Here are my ideas," said Mrs. Wyld. "I jotted down in black and white a sketch of division of work. I propose we first have this farce; it is not above amateur powers. There are three men's and three women's parts. What do you say to either Miss Fenton or Miss Jerningham taking the part of —; then Captain Stanley and Mr. Jerningham, and you Mr. Cust," turning to the young barrister, "can take the three men. Mr. Hunt knows better than I do for which you are suited."

"I would very much rather look at the play, if you can do without me," broke in Lenore. "I never acted in my life."

"That makes it more easily settled," Mr. Hunt said. "Between two stars it is difficult to choose. Miss Jerningham's powers have been well tried."

Augusta Jerningham was in good humour again. She and Jack had been old friends; she could not brook the slightest interference in her kingdom.

The discussion continued amicably. The actors were impressed with the solemn injunction of knowing their parts. Four scenes from Shakspeare had been selected. Lenore was, after all, to act Juliet. There had been such a clamour for the hackneyed balcony scene that Mr. Hunt had perforce to give in, and Captain Stanley was to be the favoured Romeo.

"I would like to have finished off with a telling tableau I once saw," said Mrs. Wyld. "We must have two men and one girl. You, Mr. Hunt, must be one of them; you are acting in none. Then, Mr. Jerningham, you can be the other. Lenore, you are only appearing in one other act; you will make the third. I am not going to tell my tableau till I present it to the public."

All was now settled, the conversation was becoming general, lights were brought in, and the party dispersed itself into groups; some old engravings were produced to gather ideas for the different costumes, and a search had to be made for a box containing dresses of the past century.

Lenore had risen from her lowly seat and found a quiet corner, where, unobserved, she could see and not be seen. She felt shy and reserved amongst the gathering, in which she was the only stranger.

It was all so new to her, the looking on was as yet pleasure enough. Presently, her corner was discovered, and the other low window-seat was occupied.

"Far from the madding crowd?" asked Jack Hunt, interrogatively.

"Distance lends enchantment to the view," she answered. "You know, outsiders see most of the game."

"You look upon it all, then, as a play. The acting has already begun for you!"

"I am interested," she answered. "This is a side of life I have never seen before."

"Is it as a philosopher you watch poor struggling humanity?" he asked, smiling at her earnestness.

"Or perhaps as an actor ready for his part?"

"Neither as acknowledged philosopher nor actor; only one of the interested mob!"

"You despise, then, to enter the lists with the defence of armour?" he said. "You will not play an acknowledged part?"

"My trial has not yet come; I may have to don my armour some day," she answered him, gravely,

looking away past him into the room from under the drapery of curtains by which they were surrounded. There was silence for a few minutes, then Lenore looked round, laughing, and suddenly changed the conversation.

"The armour we spoke of!" she exclaimed, as a rattling suit of chain mail was disentombed. "Who is that decoration for?" she asked, raising her voice, and with one hand holding back the curtain.

"It has been found expressly for Juliet," retorted Captain Stanley. "I, as Romeo, have got a captivating costume, which looks exceedingly like my great-grandmother's gown."

"Really, Captain Stanley is so amusing!" Miss Dacre exclaimed. "You do not mean what you say?"

"I never was more in earnest," he answered, gravely. In the window-seat, Jack had turned to Lenore.

"The fates have conspired against you," he said. "Even Captain Stanley has declared that the armour must be donned!"

She would not pick up the gauntlet he had thrown down, but again asked some questions as to what was passing in the room.

Somebody had suggested a skating party, and plans were being laid for the day following Christ-

mas. Old Mr. Dacre came in from Sir James's room.

"No hopes for you young people," he said. "The wind is rising. We shall all be out with the hounds again by Wednesday."

His news did not seem to damp the general spirits; the last amusement was even better than the first. The dressing gong sounded, there was a move amongst the company, the ladies were going to their rooms. Jack Hunt prepared to take his departure; the Suttons expected him to return for dinner.

"The meet is at Sutton Hall, on Wednesday. Good-bye till then," and he was gone.





CHAPTER IV.

IN THE TWILIGHT.

DINNER passed pleasantly ; round the table not a single break in the conversation—except, perhaps, where Mrs. Dacre was all intent upon the good things provided, and Mr. Cust—whom unkind fate had placed next her—looked with envious eyes at Mr. Jerningham monopolising Miss Susan Dacre. He turned in despair to Lenore, but she and Captain Stanley were deep in foreign experiences ; so he had to follow Mrs. Dacre's example, until Mrs. Wyld, seeing his forlorn condition, asked some question that he alone could answer, and so the conversation became general at her end of the table.

In another hour and a-half they were all collected in the billiard-room, and Captain Stanley was initiating Lenore into the mysteries of pool. Two hours more and they had dispersed, but the

evening's amusements had gone far to rub off the last remnants of Lenore's strangeness.

Christmas Day dawned with none of its proper whiteness—a leaden sky and fast-melting snow, not tempting for foot passengers.

Breakfast was not till ten. Some of the ladies were going to church, others would not brave the weather. Captain Stanley and Mr. Jerningham had not even made their appearance. The smoking-room party had sat up very late.

The omnibus came to the door before breakfast was finished, and there was some hurry to be at the church in time.

Service was beginning, and the organist was lustily playing the final chords previous to the development of the voluntary into the Christmas Anthem. Lenore felt conscious that their party attracted a good deal of attention, and was only too glad to find herself at last seated in the front row of the gallery. She did not raise her eyes until the hymn was over, and became aware that the Sutton Hall seat was opposite to them, and Mr. Hunt was there. He was watching till she saw him, and their eyes met. After that one recognition, Lenore did not turn that way again.

It was raining when they came out of church, and the Christmas greetings were crowded into a small portico. The Sutton carriage was at the

door, and being filled, when the Wylds' party at last emerged from the narrow aisle. Two dripping umbrellas formed a canopy in the doorway. There was a few minutes' delay, Mrs. Sutton had some message to give Mrs. Wyld about the programme for the following week. "You are all expected at lunch to-morrow," she said. "I trust to your bringing as large a party as you can, Mrs. Wyld."

"Happy Christmas, Miss Fenton. What a dreadful day it is! I hope we may have a good one to-morrow." Hunt's raiment looked impervious to moisture. Not so Lenore, who had stupidly forgotten her cloak.

"Yes! I suppose you huntsmen are all rejoicing at the rain. I am selfish enough to wish the frost had continued."

"Do you not follow the hounds, Miss Fenton? It is such glorious sport!"

"No; I never have done so. Mr. Wyld promised me a mount for to-morrow if my wrist had been better, but it is not recovered sufficiently yet."

"You will, at any rate, drive to the meet?"

"I do not think I could stand only looking on; it would be too tantalising."

"Take care, Miss Fenton; you are contradicting your statement of last night, that a place among the interested mob was all-satisfying."

"It's only a woman's change of mind," she said, laughing. "You surely do not hold the female sex responsible to-day for what it thought yesterday?"

"Mrs. Wyld is waiting, Miss Fenton; here comes Captain Stanley for you. Let me take you to the carriage."

"Do not trouble. Captain Stanley's umbrella is already wet. Good-bye."

"Then we do not meet to-morrow?"

"Oh! I cannot promise; to-morrow is not to-day. I may have changed my mind by that time."

But Lenore did not change her mind, and she saw the party start at ten o'clock the following morning, determined to devote some hours to her father. Mrs. Dacre was also left behind; all the rest went off in high spirits. Miss Jerningham was at her very best on horseback, and with Lenore Fenton not of the party, she expected to have a day of unclouded enjoyment.

But things did not turn out all that her fancy painted. The fox did not behave as was expected, and went off in a wrong direction, the consequence being that the party got separated, and did not meet again during the run. Miss Jerningham had gone with the other ladies to the probable end of the cover, and though it only threw them out for a

few minutes, yet three or four of the men had got a start, amongst them Mr. Hunt.

In the meantime, Lenore was almost beginning to regret the part she had chosen. It was not lively sitting listening for some time to Mrs. Dacre's remarks on the news of the day, from which she gradually dropped into the all-engrossing topic of housekeeping botherations. Having borne it patiently for an hour or so, she made the excuse of going to her father, and spent the time with him until luncheon hour; but he was getting irritable from the long confinement, and abused fate for ever letting them be mixed up with the untoward railway collision.

But the longest morning must have an end, and the longest lunch be finished at last; and Lenore, in thick boots and well looped-up tweed costume, determined to brave the muddy roads and explore the country round.

The air was refreshing after her father's hot room, and she quickened her pace, with the intention of taking a round Mrs. Wyld had spoken of.

She had been walking for upwards of an hour, when she became conscious that the afternoon was closing in, and that she had not found the road she had expected that would lead her home again. Presently she heard the sound of horses' footsteps,

and turning, saw Miss Jerningham, Miss Dacre, and Captain Stanley.

"You are some way from home, Miss Fenton. It is very adventurous of you going so far alone," the former said, as they rode up.

"I have lost my way," Lenore answered. "Perhaps you can tell me the shortest cut home. I will make good speed, and not be long after you."

The road was pointed out, and the riders went on.

"Have you had a good day?" Lenore called after them.

"Oh! so charmingly delightful," exclaimed Miss Dacre.

"Not very," said Augusta Jerningham in the same breath.

Conflicting statements, thought Lenore; and she fell into a pleasant train of thought respecting the past week's experiences. She had turned off the high road, and was crossing a grass park, picking her steps with caution, the path in many places lying under water. It was getting dusk, and the air was full of a hazy blue mist; a crimson light in the west told of where the sun once had tried to be. A feeling of frost in the air and the sharp exercise had brought a bright colour into her face.

"If you always walk at that pace, Miss Fenton,

you will manage to cross a good deal of country during your life."

Lenore started ; she had not heard the sound of footsteps on the turf.

" Oh ! it is you, Mr. Hunt. I neither heard nor saw you. I like walking fast, and, besides, it is late. I lost my way, but, fortunately, I met some of the others returning from their day's sport, and Miss Jerningham told me of this short way to The Hurst. But I must go, as it is too dark to be out alone."

She made a movement as if to say good-bye, but he did not appear to notice it.

" It *is* too dark," he said. " I am sure Mrs. Wyld would wish me to see you home."

" Oh ! please do not come out of your way." But he had dismounted, and was leading his horse beside her before she could stop him. The lights from The Hurst shone brightly through the trees, and Lenore hurried her steps.

" You need not walk so fast now, Miss Fenton ; you know, you are no longer alone. Tell me, do you often take solitary walks like this ?"

" I could do nothing else to-day, when I was left in solitary state with Mrs. Dacre ; besides, I like a walk with no company but my own."

" I wonder," he said, glancing at the bright, calm face looking so fully up at him, " if you will ever

know the feeling of dread of your own company. There do come times in one's life when the one wish, the one endeavour, is never to be alone; when the rush of business, the whirl of gaiety, the society even of jarring companions, is preferable far even to the silence in which one stands alone with the knowledge that I am I."

There was a moment's pause before Lenore spoke, and then she said with some diffidence—

"Surely all men, and some women also, must pass through it who ever attain to any intellectual greatness. I may be wrong, but it seems to me that it is not till this second birth, if I may call it so, has been passed through, that anyone can really comprehend what he is, or be able to help effectually his storm-tossed brethren."

"You understand it then," he answered; "you have felt what I mean; and, having established your footing, you love your solitary walks, you know where and what you are?"

"I did not mean to infer my own experiences; they are yet too crude to be of any value. I speak of what I have noticed in others."

"If you watch so closely and so calmly, would you from your standpoint of safety reach a hand to some struggling brother?"

"My help, I fear, would be but inefficient. I would gladly throw the rope that would save him.

It would lie with himself whether he would accept it or no. I *could not* be the rope myself."

"And the rope, what do you say it is?" he asked, eagerly. They were within the hedge of The Hurst garden by this time. Down the pathway the light streamed in a ruddy glow from the fire-illuminated library. The eagerness of his question startled her. She stood still a moment, and waited before she gave the answer.

"And the rope, what do you say it is?" he again repeated. "Can one find an escape from oneself in the closest of all ties in human life?"

"The saving power, the rope I speak of, is it not Faith, which can pierce the veil of the unseen, which can unite one so with the other world that one no longer is overpowered with one's individual solitude? It seems to me that human companionship, even of the closest kind, can be a help—nothing more."

She stopped, suddenly aware of the earnestness with which she was speaking. There was a shadow fell across the path. Some one had entered the library.

"I must really say good-bye now," Lenore said at last; "we have dropped into a philosophical discussion, in which I have aired some of my old-world theories."

"Forgive me for detaining you so long," Jack

answered. "The old-world theories have a ring of truth in them. Will you another day be my teacher?"

"You reverse the order of things," she said, and held out her hand.

"Good-bye," he said. The door opened, and he left her.

She was conscious of the parting pressure, even after she had taken off her things, and formed one of the merry group round the afternoon tea-table, where she was laughingly cross-questioned as to how she had lost and found her way; but she kept a discreet silence as to the companion of her homeward walk.





CHAPTER V.

TABLEAUX VIVANTS.

A CHANCE meeting, a new friendship, a few days' companionship, perhaps a few conversational *tête-à-têtes*, perhaps not even so much, and it has been done, the channel of life has been for ever changed. All this has been written hundreds of times, and yet humanity has not yet learnt that one's course in this world rests entirely on the little things. Women, and men also, are always watching for the great events which are to form their destinies, and the trivial meeting is unnoticed; afterwards, looking back, it is the peg on which is hung the man's future history.

And so it was with Jack Hunt and Lenore. He had not lived for fifteen years in London, continually moving in the best society, without having formed some idea of what a woman ought to be. In the crowded *salons* of Belgravia, he had often

looked for the face which was to claim his life's devotion. "Many a time he had loved for a minute," and with the ardour which characterised his whole nature, he had followed up the new acquaintanceship, only to find that for him the exquisitely beautiful fruit contained at heart nothing but ashes. And now, at last, surely he had discovered what he sought. The fruit was not so fair, perhaps, to look upon as what had tempted him in the past years ; it seemed to him to hang far above his reach, more as if a star from heaven had fallen and become entangled in the topmost branches of the tree which he longed so to climb.

And yet what had he to offer to tempt this desirable star to shine for him ? To have begun to make a name for oneself by no means implies having begun to make a fortune ; and though a horridly matter-of-fact view of the subject for any lover to take, Jack knew quite well he need not approach Sir James on the subject of his admiration for his daughter, without being able to back up the admiration so well expressed by a similarly well-expressed system of ways and means—the pounds, shillings, and pence of daily life.

He could not yet tell if he had awakened any interest in Lenore, and after leaving her at The Hurst on the afternoon before mentioned, he dis-

cussed seriously with himself if the more honourable course to pursue would not be to throw up his managership and flee from the charms of the syren. Then a long string of objections immediately presented themselves against this mode of procedure. It would be unfair to leave Mrs. Wyld in the lurch ; it would spoil the pleasure of the Christmas party. He was strong enough surely to live through the next week without either letting himself or anyone else take much harm. It would be pusillanimous to run when no one was in danger but himself. The last argument was decisive ; he would stay and brave it out.

But it is difficult always to control the actions and events into which one is thrown when one is but a unit in a whole ; and for the week following Christmas there were no end of meetings, at which the newly-kindled flame gathered strength. It was not his fault that the staff of actors were wholly unequal to their parts, and that to get the acting to a proper state of perfection there must be daily rehearsals.

Nor was it his fault that Lenore did not act in the play, but formed audience, or assisted as stage manager, or made herself generally useful.

It was all very pleasant and delightful, and the week was running fast away ; in another day all danger would be over—they would part, in all

probability not to meet again. Surely not to sip the honey of life would be ingratitude.

How plausible it all sounded. There is nothing that man cannot talk himself into thinking.

And over Lenore the subtle spell was unconsciously creeping—an intense enjoyment of her daily, nay, hourly existence, a slight amount of impatience against her father's demands on her time, always stamped down and rewarded by an extra half-hour spent in his society, when the beguiling voices crept across the passage from the library, where the rehearsals took place, and peals of distant laughter told of the fun within.

She did not make an analysis of her happiness. She lived and learned to love unknown as yet to herself.

The day of the acting dawned at last ; all morning the final touches were to be given to the different costumes. A full-dress rehearsal was immediately to precede the play. A large gathering of neighbours were to be assembled, and after the acting was over, the festivities were to end with a dance. Such was the programme prepared by the Wylds for the amusement of their guests.

In the week spent together, a kind of friendship had sprung up between Augusta Jerningham and Lenore, sorely against the inclinations of the former ; but Lenore was utterly ignorant of any cause

why her society should be disagreeable to Augusta, and Miss Jerningham on her side found her policy best to be on good terms with the general favourite.

After lunch on the day in question, Mrs. Wyld proposed that they should go for a walk to refresh themselves in the evening, and chance threw the two girls together. Immediately following them were Mrs. Wyld and Miss Dacre ; while still further in the background, the rest of the party were linked together in twos and threes. Conversation flagged at times between Lenore and Miss Jerningham, and snatches of what those behind them were saying filled up the pauses.

Lenore heard her own name mentioned, and involuntarily she overheard what was said ; but as the talk became personal, Mrs. Wyld's voice dropped to a lower one. Suddenly she was roused from silence by Miss Jerningham's voice—

“You are really in dreamland, Miss Fenton. I have asked the same question three times, and can get no answer.”

“I beg your pardon,” Lenore answered, utterly confused at her own obliviousness.

“For the fourth time, then, what is the tableau that you and Philip and Mr. Hunt are to act to-night?”

“Has your brother not told you? It is a most

sensational composition, and I rebelled against my character, which is to be your brother's good angel. He and Mr. Hunt are to be playing chess. Mr. Hunt, as Mephistopheles, is supposed to be playing for his victim's soul. I, in the background, with wings and all in keeping, am watching the final play of the game. I suppose it is a good piece of effect, and your brother looks horrible, with his disordered hair, an empty bottle and glass beside him, and his nervous hands clutching at the pieces; while, with a diabolical sneer, Mephistopheles is preparing for the checkmate move."

"It will suit Mr. Hunt very well; he likes to put on a show of cynicism even in ordinary life. He thinks it goes down well with women," added Miss Jerningham, with a laugh.

"Does he? I had not observed it. He is always so bright and pleasant, I should not have given him credit for such devices."

"Wait till you know him a little better. He is always so *devoué* at first, but it soon passes off. Mrs. Wyld, I am trying to instil some of my opinions about Mr. Hunt into Miss Fenton."

"Don't believe Augusta, Miss Fenton. I quite take your side in defence of the absent."

"But I was defending no one," laughed Lenore. "I only said I had not yet discovered that Mr. Hunt was a cynic."

"There are cynics and cynics," answered Mrs. Wyld, "which my husband would say was my usual clear way of putting things. You may go a very long way before you find a man who has lived so much with so small a vein of cynicism."

"Why, Mrs. Wyld, I had no idea that Mr. Hunt had so staunch a supporter. May we add you to the list of his devotees? He must be rather proud of his string of conquests. Miss Fenton, I think, bids fair to become one also."

Lenore coloured uncomfortably, and did not speak, but Mrs. Wyld answered, with some sharpness, "Don't talk nonsense, Augusta. If the list is really to be made, it must be done alphabetically, and I suppose you know what that implies; but enough of such nonsensical talk. I think we ought not to go much farther, or you ladies will be over-tired to-night."

The conversation turned to general subjects, but Lenore was silent. She was glad to find herself at home again, and slipped away to her room for half-an-hour's rest.

She drew an arm-chair towards the fire, determined to be lazy for a short time. She felt irritable and out of humour. Augusta Jerningham's words had struck sharply, and Lenore was cross with herself for being so easily put out of temper. She was indignant, too, at the imputation

of being only too ready to be one of Mr. Hunt's admirers, and the glimmer of truth in it made her indignation all the more poignant.

She would studiously avoid him all evening, and show Miss Jerningham what utter nonsense her words had been.

She went downstairs, determined to carry her resolution into effect, and hearing Mr. Hunt's voice amongst those in the library, she turned into her father's room. The post had just come in, and Sir James was opening a pile of letters when his daughter entered.

"Pleasant to be remembered," said he, good humouredly. "Not by you, my dear," seeing his daughter's look of surprise. "It was only a letter from an old friend that made me benignly philanthropical. There, you can look at it for yourself. The man's a good deal younger than I am, and in the days gone by he had every right to owe me a grudge, as I won what he also desired. I suppose it is the memory of your mother, child, which makes him so desirous of seeing you."

Lenore lifted the open note from the table, and read the kind, formal expressions of sympathy with her father's misfortune, and passed on to the latter half, in which he warmly pressed an invitation to Sir James to come and see his old friend, and bring his daughter; he wished to make

her acquaintance for the sake of "auld lang syne."

"Who and what is he?" asked Lenore, as she came to the end and read the simple signature of "Meredith."

"Fred Barton joined my old regiment when I was senior lieutenant. He did not remain long in the service. Unfortunately for him, we both fell in love with your mother. He was some years her junior, but the liking was no less lasting. He left the army, and wandered about the world. His uncle, then Lord Meredith, gave him a liberal allowance; Fred was his heir, and the old lord died only three or four years ago. Fred must be a man of fifty now—dear me, how time flies!"

"We must find him out whenever we go up to town. I like his letter; it is out of the common."

A knock at the door, and Captain Stanley entered.

"You are required, Miss Fenton, about something or other. We are to dine at five o'clock, to give plenty of time for dressing and rehearsal, and things are not yet all settled; your valuable advice is wanted."

"What it is to be a person of consequence, Captain Stanley!" said Lenore, following him out of the room.

"I agree with you, Miss Fenton, especially when it is so well deserved."

"No civil speeches, please ; I don't like them."

The words did not escape Jack Hunt, who was standing near the door when they entered ; and when Lenore passed him without notice, though they had not previously met that day, apparently engrossed in aimless repartee with Captain Stanley, Mr. Hunt's temper was not improved.

"Here you are, Lenore. We require your valuable advice. There is a discussion as to which of the tableaux is to be acted first."

"I should have thought you ought to settle that, Mrs. Wyld ; but it cannot much signify."

"Now, Miss Fenton, listen to me," said Philip Jerningham, crossing the room and planting himself before her. "You must hear the whole state of the case. Augusta says——"

"No, no, that's not fair, Mr. Jerningham ; no names mentioned, please," exclaimed the hostess.

"Well, then, to begin again. Some one says that the tableau in which you and I are to take such conspicuous parts ought to precede the Shaksperian ones, being of a much lower order of merit—not very civil to you and me, but never mind that. Secondly, some one else says that as a piece of stage effect it would make a good wind-up. Now what we want to know is this : Whether would

you prefer remaining for the rest of the evening in the dress of Juliet, or as my good angel?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Philip," exclaimed his sister.

"Thank you! If that is all, I am going to change my dress before dancing," Lenore answered. "I leave the decision to Mrs. Wyld."

"In that case," Mrs. Wyld said, "it shall rest as it was first arranged. Do you know dinner is to be in ten minutes? So we had better make haste."

There was a general, hurried dispersion. Lenore and Mrs. Wyld were the last ladies to leave the room.

"Miss Fenton, there is another thing Mr. Hunt is anxious to know," said Philip, mischievously following Lenore to the door, which Jack was holding open. "In this wonderful tableau, are you going to regard me sorrowfully or Mr. Hunt viciously, for it is of great moment to both of us?"

"Oh, you most sorrowfully, certainly. Angels have nothing to do with the powers of darkness."

"That's one for you, Hunt," and Lenore gave Philip a laughing nod as she left the room.

Dinner was over; all the actors had retired to don their various costumes, and already a motley group was collecting behind the scenes. The Hurst was peculiarly well adapted for theatricals,

as wide, sliding doors separated the drawing-rooms, and in the smaller of the two a stage and footlights had been put up.

Lenore was finishing her toilette ; neither of her parts was till near the end, and she heard the various bedroom doors close as the occupants, armed *cap-à-pie*, descended to the arena.

At last she could no longer delay, though much more inclined to remain where she was. She felt as if things were all crooked ; she did not understand her mixed feelings.

She opened her door, and passed swiftly along the old oak corridor, hastening down the dimly-lighted stair. A door opened on the first landing, and Lenore started back. Mephistopheles was beside her.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Fenton ; I did not mean to startle you."

"You look horrible," she exclaimed, continuing her course past him downstairs.

"Won't you speak to me ? What have I done to offend you ? Tell me."

"We are late," she said ; "they must be all waiting for us."

"I forgot that you would have nothing to do with an angel of darkness," he exclaimed, bitterly ; "but you are not yet robed in angel garb. Has Juliet no sympathy ?"

"Do not talk nonsense, Mr. Hunt. I am both an unwilling Juliet and angel."

"Then as your own true self you will not thus utterly despise me. You will promise me the first and last waltzes to-night, will you not?"

They had reached the drawing-room door, and Lenore put forward her hand to open it, but stayed a moment in the act; she turned her face towards him, and a bright smile played about her mouth and eyes.

"If Mephistopheles will also be himself, I will dance with him."

No time for more; she instantly turned the handle, and they were amongst the others.

Mrs. Wyld saw the light in Lenore's eyes as she entered. She wondered what had brought it there.

The bell was ringing for the curtain to rise. The rehearsal had been a complete success, and Augusta, with triumph and excitement written in every feature, was just going before the audience.

The non-actors of the moment were watching from behind the screen. There was a roar of applause as the first scene closed. Mrs. Wyld left the spectators for a moment to assure the actors of the universal approval.

"It is all owing to you, Mr. Hunt. We could never have achieved the success without you."

He answered the correct speech for the occasion :

“Not me, Mrs. Wyld ; the actors deserve the thanks.”

“The wheels may all be there,” she said ; “it requires the mainspring to set them going.”

And now things went on rapidly. The play was over. Augusta had been called before the curtain. She had made the success of it.

“You did splendidly, Miss Jerningham,” said Mr. Hunt ; “let me congratulate you.”

She was passing behind the scenes on her way to the green-room to change her dress for the part of Lady Macbeth. The other characters were already most of them in costume.

“Where is Juliet ?” asked Romeo, and the two were soon arranged. The curtain rose, waited a minute, and fell again. A clamorous demand arose for a repetition, and once more the curtain drew slowly up. Lenore felt a nervous disposition to laugh, and was thankful when released from her balcony.

Then followed the other three tableaux, and before the last all the performers had joined the audience.

When the curtain rose, there was a murmur of applause. The subject might verge on clap-trap effect, but it was a telling picture. As before described, a chess table formed the centre of the

group. Mephistopheles and his victim were deep in the game ; the complete misery and recklessness of the man were splendidly portrayed. His hand was on a piece, but there was hesitation in the movement—a better influence was making itself felt—his sable majesty bending forward, watching the play with a sardonic grin. In wonderful relief to the horror of the picture was the figure of the angel in the background.

Something in the scene had really touched Lenore, and a wonderfully pitying expression rested on her face. Her hair fell to her waist in a dark rippling mass, and the perfect purity of her snow-white dress and wings completed the whole.

The curtain rose and fell three times, and yet the spectators were not satisfied. They must have one more look. It rose for the last time, was just falling, when some one among the audience gave a scream.

Mephistopheles sprang from his seat and tore down the drapery behind Lenore. It was some flimsy material, and a footlight at the corner, wafted by the successive rising and falling of the curtain, made it take fire.

There was a few minutes' scuffle, it was out, and they were all congratulating themselves it was no worse. Mr. Hunt had burnt his hand, and Miss

Fenton had had a very narrow escape ; her wings were singed, and the curtain was in ashes.

The forms were being cleared away, and the company were moving to the old hall, where dancing was to take place.

Lenore went up to her room to change her dress. Her face was deadly pale, but she had not uttered a sound, even when, on looking round, she had seen the burning curtain behind her.

Philip Jerningham was crossing the hall as she once more descended the staircase.

“You have to thank Mr. Hunt for your life, Miss Fenton. I never saw a thing more pluckily done.”





CHAPTER VI.

ALMOST TOLD.

IT was late the following morning before any of the party assembled in the breakfast-room.

Dancing had continued until an early hour, and not even the knowledge that they were to disperse that day proved sufficient to collect the scattered forces. Lenore had slept but little; the unwonted gaiety had chased the god away who is wooed back with such difficulty when once put to flight.

She was in her father's room at the usual hour, and she, with Mrs. Wyld, had finished breakfast before any of the others appeared. Mrs. Wyld went to her household duties, and Lenore found a resting-place in the window seat of the library. She was suffering from the reaction of the previous evening, and the general break-up of the party did not tend to raise her spirits.

It had all been very pleasant and delightful, but it was over, and what had been the good of it all,

save making pleasant friends and arousing new interests which, as far as she could see, had but a poor chance of ever going any further? There had been plans laid for meeting in town in May, but May seemed a long way off, and town was a wide word. She was in an overtired, overstrained mood, ready to make mountains of molehills.

She opened the glass door and let the air blow on her heated temples. The day was too mild for the time of year, and through the leafless branches the distant country looked damp and hazy from rising moisture; a stillness lay on everything—even the rooks cawed lazily.

Outward objects were acting on Lenore's frame of mind with a lulling mesmeric influence—in fact, she was very nearly asleep, when her eye was attracted by a figure coming along the path to the garden. There was no mistaking who it was, and her pulses gave a quick throb of pleasure. She had not said good-bye to Mr. Hunt the previous evening; Mrs. Sutton had carried him off before the final dance, and Miss Jerningham had said he had told her that he was going south by the first train.

He was making his way to the front door, but turned up the path, as he espied Lenore's figure at the window.

"I thought you were leaving this morning," she

said, "and I was sorry not to have seen you again; because——"

"You did not think I was going away without saying good-bye?" he broke in.

"Because," she continued, "I did not thank you last night for what you did; believe me, I am very grateful."

Jack scarcely had courage to stop her thanks; she looked so charming, standing in the fresh morning light, too shy to raise her eyes, and the faintest flush stealing into her face.

"And you know," she went on, as the silence continued, "but for you, I hardly dare to think what might have happened."

Still the silence remained unbroken.

"Are my thanks too tardy, Mr. Hunt, that you take no notice of them? I could not thank you last night for such a service amongst all the dazzle of light and whirl of music."

"Do you think," he answered at last, very gravely, "that I remained silent because I was unheeding? No—a thousand times, no!—but because I have grown to love the sound of your voice more than any other sound that is in nature, and not even when you were giving me such undeserved thanks could I rouse myself from the spell."

It was Lenore now to be silent. What could she answer to such an avowal? She stood and waited

for what must come next, and her eyes rested dreamily on the slumbering landscape. She was all unconscious of the gaze fastened on her. It seemed as if she had lived the scene before in some other life—it was but the echo of a dreamt-of chord that came to her.

Complete silence rested on all their surroundings; in the distance was heard the cackle of geese at the neighbouring farm, and the call of the ploughman to his team. It was too far off to disturb them; only when a ripple of laughter came to them through oak-lined walls from the adjoining breakfast-room did Jack rouse himself from his reverie.

He turned to Lenore, and in tones rendered hurried by the sound of approaching footsteps, he exclaimed, "Do you think that this fortnight is to pass from my life and leave it as it was before? Do you dream that the shadow of so much purity and goodness has been permitted to fall upon my path, and no trace of the snow be left which has fallen from heaven? Thank God, I may return to the grimy atmosphere of my town life with a firmer sense of the goodness and truth still left in the world; and for this I have to thank you, Lenore."

"Oh, hush! you must not call me that; and they are coming."

There was the sound of the dining-room door opening, and the hum of voices increased.

"Only one thing will you promise me—that when you come to town in spring I may come and see you, and then, perhaps," he said, "you will let me tell you what I have no right to say now; not," he added as if more to himself than her—"not until I see my way clearer before me."

There was time for no more; the door opened and the Jerninghams entered, followed by Miss Dacre, but Lenore had escaped by the glass door, and had gained the shelter of her own room. For a few minutes, at any rate, she would rather not face the public.

"The ubiquitous!" exclaimed Philip. "I thought you were going by the first train, Hunt?"

"I usurped a woman's privilege, and changed my mind."

"Dear me," said Augusta, scanning the room, "Mrs. Wyld said Miss Fenton was here. I want her to show me that piece of work."

"You have not seen her, Hunt?" asked Philip.

"I have just entered the room. Has Miss Fenton been seen this morning?"

"Oh yes!" said Miss Dacre, good-naturedly. "She was with her father at the usual hour."

"It's very strange," said Augusta; "I know she

was here five minutes ago, for Mrs. Wyld told me so."

"Well, Miss Jerningham, it's my loss, as I am at this moment on my way to the station, and must say good-bye to everyone here assembled."

"If you had come in by the door, instead of this way, you would have found us all in the breakfast-room, Mr. Hunt."

"Except Miss Fenton, Augusta; you forget that," said her brother.

"Shall I let Mrs. Wyld know you are here? She will be sorry to miss you;" and Miss Dacre hurried off to find their hostess.

"The lost one has been found. Your disappearance has been causing us all much anxiety, Miss Fenton, as we had Mrs. Wyld's testimony that you were in the library, yet no one would own to having seen you."

Lenore had entered almost unobserved, when Mr. Jerningham's remark turned the attention of the company upon her.

"Good morning, Miss Fenton; you are just in time to say farewell. I am on my way to the station."

Lenore had forgotten the necessity to appear as if they had not already met, and she felt Miss Jerningham's sharp eyes watching her.

"I did not think we were to have the pleasure of seeing you this morning, Mr. Hunt."

"Miss Jerningham did not tell you, then, of the pleasure in store for you?"

"You did not leave me charged with a message, Mr. Hunt," Augusta exclaimed. "The chances of your appearance from what you said seemed to be so very problematical, that I saved them the pain of disappointment."

"Always the same, Miss Jerningham, always thinking of others."

Jack bowed low as he laid the above compliment at Augusta's feet. She did not receive it as he expected, and answered sharply—

"There are two ways of thinking of others; which do you mean?"

"Now for a passage of arms between my sister and Hunt. There is something about you, Jack, that seems to raise the pugilistic tendency in Augusta. It is most refreshing to have a discord at times; the harmony of our party might otherwise prove monotonous."

"I fear, Philip, I have no time to lay myself out for general amusement this morning. My time is up."

Then came "Good-bye" all round, and Mr. Wyld accompanied his guest to the door. Footsteps were heard returning, and once more Mr. Hunt appeared.

"Do you think I might disturb your father so early, Miss Fenton? I do not like to go without seeing him."

"I will come and see," Lenore answered.

In the hall they were alone, and he had time for one word more before they parted.

"You gave me no answer," he said. "You did not give me leave to hunt you out when you come to town."

"Didn't I—yes, of course, you may come. I know my father will be delighted to see you."

He gave the slightest stamp of impatience.

"That is not what I wish to know. Will *you* be glad to see me? I will not come near you unless; this cannot continue as an ordinary friendship. It lies completely in your hands whether we are ever to meet again or not. Better far to give me a decided answer now, and so save misery in the future."

"You are unreasonable, Mr. Hunt. I see no reason why in the future we are to avoid each other. I, for one, will be very glad to meet in spring."

"Thank you; you need not say more. I must go."

"You have not seen my father."

He pulled out his watch. "I have not a moment to lose. Will you say all kind things from me, and wishes for his complete recovery?"

“Good-bye,” he continued, taking both her hands in his. “Good-bye, Lenore.”

She raised her eyes one moment to his, and a bright warm colour stole over her face. Then softly she said the form of farewell so much more to her than our cold good-bye—“A Dieu!”

“A Dieu!” he answered, and she was left alone in the large, quiet hall, surrounded by a great happiness that she had never felt before.

Moments of bliss are not of long duration, nor of frequent occurrence either, and Lenore was awakened from her earthly paradise by the sound of her father’s voice. His temper was not gaining much of the heavenly element, and Lenore had to make every allowance to herself for him, that her filial sentiments should undergo no disarrangement. It may have been that she was less in a humour to bear with him, but he certainly seemed to her more than ordinarily cantankerous that morning.

“My dear, I thought you were never coming in. Whom were you talking to in the hall? John went away some time ago and forgot to give me my newspaper, and here I am, an utterly cumbersome, useless log—must wait for some Samaritan to give me a thing lying two yards off.”

“I am so sorry, Father. I hope you had not been waiting long. Mr. Hunt came to say good-

bye, and he sent you all kind of messages and hopes for your speedy recovery."

"Why couldn't he come in and give me them himself? He was near enough my room."

"I saw him in the hall, Father, and he was in a great hurry."

"It looked very like it, when he could stand chattering to you for so long. Really this house is so abominably full of echoes that one never has peace to read or anything."

Lenore busied herself in arranging her father's papers, knowing that silence was by far the safest course. But the storm was still muttering, and presently broke out again.

"I suppose those people all leave to-day. It's just as well. In my young days, such a thing was never heard of as a house filled with young men and women, allowed to do just as they like without anyone to say them nay."

"But, Papa, you forget Colonel and Mrs. Dacre; they are surely chaperon enough."

"Old fools! Would not have sense to see, though you were all going straight to the——humph!"

"Besides, you know, after all, what have we done save amuse ourselves most innocently?"

"It's all very well, very well; but we were taught in my young days that too much familiarity

breeds contempt. The present generation would do well to study that."

"Would you like me to read you the leader in the *Times*? I heard Mr. Hunt say that it was well worth looking at to-day."

"There you go!—always Mr. Hunt this, and Mr. Hunt that. Now understand, once for all, that when you go with me to London I will have none of these goings on. I will have no Mr. Hunt or any young man coming to loaf about the house; so you may make up your mind to do without them. A pack of hungry fortune-hunters continually round my daughter! I won't stand it!"

Lenore had kept perfectly calm till now, but there was an angry flash in her eyes at the last imputation.

"I had better tell you at once, Papa, that Mr. Hunt asked me for our address in town, which I gave him. He is coming to see us. I never dreamt for a moment that you could possibly object."

"Hunt be hanged!" Sir James finished with a final growl, and took up his paper without another word.

Lenore left the room without speaking. It was a troublous ending to her bright morning, and she felt there might be dangers in the unknown waters in front of her.

“ Dear me, how I wish we had never met ! ” But no ! the thought just passed through her mind ; it could find no resting-place. Above all the bother and worry, she was conscious of a happiness, all her own, which was yet too new and strange for any rubs of daily life to soil.





CHAPTER VII.

“WHERE THE BROOK AND RIVER MEET.”

THE months ran on, and Easter was come and gone. London was awaking from its winter sleep, and preparing itself for the coming campaign.

In the parks the trees were bursting into green ; the air was full of the soft, life-giving feeling never known at any other time of year. In a garden, surrounded by four high walls, stood a large, old-fashioned mansion, respectability indelibly inscribed on everything appertaining to it. It was the school selected by Mr. Romney's two elderly and very maidenly sisters at which their dear youngest niece was to receive the polish to her education. The choice had been a subject of grave consideration, for neither of the Miss Romneys could at all approve the advanced system of education which characterises the present day—the liberal system of thought, shall we call it?

From their house in Cavendish Square, they could at intervals descend upon the training establishment they had selected in Upper Norwood, and see what progress their niece was making.

It was a very happy life Grisel Romney led with the eight or nine other girls who had also been entrusted to Miss Deborah Tufton's care—a life of work and play and bright anticipation of the future. Grisel's room was at the very top of the house, and, sitting at the window learning her lessons, she could watch the sun flash on the palace roof, and hear an echo of the music, sometimes, as it floated to her on the sun-kissed air; and when the lessons were learnt, she would produce her oft-read packet of home letters, pages from Sybil and Bryde, interspersed here and there with a few lines from Tom at Oxford, more valued because they came at all than for what they contained, brevity being their leading feature; and then one other letter, with which she always ended her inspection, the only one she had ever received from Reggie Mainwaring, telling her all had been settled, and his mother had consented to give a ball, at which she, Griselda Romney, was first to burst upon the world. The letter had been received some time before, and it wanted but a few weeks of the long-desired month of June.

Grisel was sitting one morning, as usual, at her

window, idly watching the man working in the garden ; her pile of books lay beside her, a newly-written exercise was drying in the sun—Grisel's blotting-paper was never to be found.

Presently she heard wheels stop at their gate ; this was an unusual piece of excitement at so early an hour.

She went forward to the window to see what daring intruder had ventured to break upon their convent-like seclusion. The path from the gate led through a shrubbery, and at last Grisel, breathlessly watching, descried a man's hat. It was only seen for a moment, and then disappeared behind a bush, and Grisel drew back with her curiosity unsatisfied.

A few minutes passed, and a message came that Miss Romney was wanted in the drawing-room. Grisel dashed downstairs, and halted for a moment behind the door that she might make her entrance decorously. Miss Deborah was standing talking to a tall young man, saying something about herself, Grisel heard. "Miss Romney would be much missed when she went away——"

"Tom !" exclaimed Grisel. "Oh ! why didn't you let me know you were coming ?"

The tears were in her eyes from the gladness of her surprise, and she threw her arms round Tom's neck as he stooped to kiss her.

"That will do, Grisette. Miss Tufton will think you a very demonstrative young lady."

Grisel drew back hastily ; she had forgotten the presence of a third party.

"Grisel, my dear, your brother has come to ask if you can be spared for a day. Your aunt wishes you to be with her this evening, and has undertaken to see you safely home again to-morrow."

"May I go, Miss Tufton? Please say 'yes,'" impetuously exclaimed Grisel.

"Yes, you may go ; but you must make haste, your aunt's carriage is waiting."

Grisel darted off.

"Take an opera cloak with you, Grisette, or whatever is necessary. I believe we are going to Her Majesty's house to-night."

Miss Tufton offered apologies for leaving Mr. Romney alone, and followed her pupil to see that all was right.

Half-an-hour later, Tom and Grisel were on their way back to town.

"You will find some one you do not expect at Aunt Griselda's, Grisette. I persuaded them to let me bring Bryde up with me from home. It was all settled in a few hours' time, and she is to stay at Cavendish Square till you return, six weeks after this."

"And Sybil—is she there also?"

"No; Sybil had to remain to look after our father. We only arrived yesterday, and I am due at Oxford to-morrow."

"Oh!" said Grisel, with a deep sigh of content; "it is too delightful. Whatever made you think of it?"

"When are you going to grow up, La Grise? Do you know you look as much like a child as ever?"

Tom made the above remark as they were nearing their destination, and all the way Grisel had laughed and talked in the old childish manner.

"Aunt Griselda told me I would be so surprised at the great improvement—so much quieter and less boyish than you used to be."

"But I am not grown up yet, Tom. I needn't be quiet for six weeks yet. Of course, I was like a white mouse when both my aunts and Miss Deborah inspected me; but it was all put on, Tom, I can assure you."

"And what would Miss Deborah say if she thought it was all put on?"

"Oh, Miss Deborah is a dear old prig; but you needn't tell our aunts that."

"You are incorrigible, Grisette."

"You wouldn't expect me to be different to my

dear old boy. You wouldn't like it, Tom, would you?"

Grisel laid her hand with an endearing gesture on her brother's shoulder. Tom did not shake it off. He was like the rest of her slaves. Though he hated any demonstration of affection, he would bear anything from Grisel.

What a day that was in Grisel's history! She was so glad to see Bryde, and it was such fun to go about town with no one but Tom; and even her aunts seemed pleased that she should have one day without any restriction upon her.

At last the evening came, and Grisel went to attire herself for dinner.

"There is a friend of your brother's to be at dinner, Bryde," Miss Romney said.

"Who is it, Tom?" asked Grisel.

"An Oxford chum—Philip Jerningham."

Grisel never could tell collectedly afterwards how it all happened. She had a hazy idea of feeling very shy on being introduced to Mr. Jerningham, and proud of Bryde, who was completely at her ease.

The dinner passed in pleasant, lively chit-chat. The two elderly Miss Romneys were very wide-awake, and entered fully into the *badinage* that passed.

Then the carriage came to the door, and after

that Grisel, for the first time in her life, entered an opera house. She found herself sitting between her aunt and Tom. Mr. Jerningham was next Bryde ; he was giving her his undivided attention. In her sparkling beauty, with her scarlet cloak thrown round her, she was perfect in Philip's eyes. His half-dictatorial, half-playful way of asserting his own opinion had a charm for Bryde.

"Bryde and Philip seem to be excellent friends, La Grise. What fun it is watching them !" Tom whispered.

"Bryde is friends with everyone," answered Grisel, "so long as they are not afraid of her."

"So you have found out Bryde's peculiarities, Miss Grisel. When did you begin to open your eyes to other people's doings?"

"I learnt it at Miss Tufton's. She always says that she particularly dislikes young ladies being unobservant of others' feelings."

"Did you read all Miss Tufton's rules backwards, La Grise? But we must be silent. You are missing all the overture."

"I am listening with one ear," answered Grisel, meekly, "which is more than either Bryde or Mr. Jerningham is doing."

But the curtain was rising, and Grisel's attention continued unbroken until the end of the first act. She was wrapt up in the story of Leonora in

Verdi's "Trovatore." The prima donna was singing gloriously, and the first act ended in a roar of applause.

"Oh! isn't it perfect, Tom? I never imagined it could be half as nice. How I wish Aunt Sybil had been able to come! Don't you think it charming, Aunt Griselda? I never enjoyed anything so much before."

Grisel, with laughing eyes and quickly varying colour, turned from one to another to claim their sympathy.

Mr. Jerningham was leaving his seat for a few minutes; he saw friends in the distance, and was going to speak to them. He disappeared, but presently they saw him join an elderly man and, evidently, his daughter. Both welcomed him cordially, but there was only time for a few minutes' talk before Philip resumed his seat.

"That is Sir James Fenton," he said to Bryde, "and his daughter. I spent a charming fortnight with them last Christmas at a mutual friend's house in Yorkshire. That military-looking man next them is Lord Meredith, an old friend of Sir James, with whom they have been staying for some weeks. I believe he has put house, carriages, everything at Miss Fenton's disposal while she is in town. *On dit*, that she might be Lady Meredith."

“ He is far too old, and she looks too nice to do such a thing,” Grisel broke in. She had been listening to what had passed.

“ Not so very much difference after all, considering the title put into the balance, Miss Romney ; only about five-and-twenty years.”

Grisel’s attention wandered from the second act, which had just begun, to Miss Fenton, whose face had an irresistible charm for her ; but presently the Lenore in the boxes was forgotten, her double on the stage was acting out her story.

The opera was no unknown power to Lenore, as it was to Grisel. Often before had she seen the heroine go through her dismal tragedy ; so now she watched with more interest the human elements of the house than the make-believe behind the foot-lights. The party, of which Mr. Jerningham formed one, had attracted her, and Grisel’s utter abandonment to the play, regardless of surroundings, struck her as something fresh.

She had not wished much to come that evening, but their host had taken their places, and she did not like to appear ungracious. Her father was fidgeting beside her, and proposing to leave her early. He had an engagement at his club, a very frequent occurrence with Sir James.

Lord Meredith said he would take good care of Miss Fenton, but Lenore had not the slightest wish

to have a *tête-à-tête* drive home. Her father looked on their host as a contemporary, and it was useful at times to have some one to whom he could entrust his daughter. Lord Meredith favoured the idea in the meanwhile. It was not time yet for Sir James to think otherwise.

But the opera finished at last, and the house was emptying itself slowly. In the passage, the Fentons and Romneys met for a moment.

"Will you come to tea to-morrow afternoon, Mr. Jerningham?" asked Lenore. "We are staying with Lord Meredith. I shall be at home by five o'clock."

"Thank you. I shall be delighted."

"Come away, Lenore; no time for talking; I am late for my appointment already."

Sir James spoke irritably. Lord Meredith looked annoyed, and, turning to Lenore, begged to be allowed to help her. She was hurriedly putting on some extra wrap. The difference between his manner and Sir James's was marked; his courtesy was in pleasant contrast. Lenore let him help her, and thanked him with one of her sweetest smiles. Then they hurried on, and were lost in the crowd. Philip Jerningham offered Bryde his arm—Tom was taking care of his aunt and Grisel in advance. Presently, some one spoke to Philip. Bryde heard the question, asked impatiently with a ring of

demand in the voice, as if it had a right to know.

"When did the Fentons come to town, and who is that with Miss Fenton?"

"Why, Hunt, is that you? I did not see you before?"

"I came in late; but you have not answered my question."

"Oh! The Fentons are staying with Lord Meredith at his house in Prince's Gate. You should go and see them."

"I don't know Lord Meredith."

"He will be delighted to see you. He is an old friend of Miss Fenton's father. I am going to tea there to-morrow, about five o'clock. Come with me."

"I'll see about it."

"Poor Jack!" Philip said to himself as they parted. "I am not sure that Lord Meredith will be quite as glad to see you as I made out; but I couldn't let you go home with such a dolorous and woe-begone expression."

Next day Tom went back to Oxford, and Philip with him, and Miss Romney drove Grisel home to Miss Tufton's. Grisel's first taste of gaiety had been very attractive, and the six weeks seemed a long while to her before she would spread her wings for good; but there was no help for it. A

few days spent in a judicious mixture of useful knowledge and other improving exercises reconciled her again to work ; but her dreams in her idle hours had taken more definite forms since the night at the opera ; they were peopled now with living men and women, not with the shadowy heroes of a school-girl's fancy.





CHAPTER VIII.

THE HOUSE IN PRINCE'S GATE.

Y ORD MEREDITH'S house in Prince's Gate was one in which you instinctively felt the want of the home touches which a woman's presence must always give. He was a man of taste. In his numberless wanderings, he had picked up many a thing of beauty; there was nothing jarring to the most sensitively artistic eye; subdued colouring in everything, harmony everywhere; in each corner some old china or antique bronze found shelter, while many a perfectly-chiselled souvenir from the land of sculpture showed that beauty of form even more than of colour had been studied in the perfect collection—for collection it was. Herein lay the feeling of dissatisfaction in the rooms. It was the temple set aside and adorned for the worship of beauty, but living beauty was wanting; it was the beauty of the past, utterly dead.

So Lord Meredith, having completed his work, looked round on all he had done, and retired more than ever into his study. He rarely entered them now. "It is beautiful," he said, "but it does not please me as much as I expected."

When the Fentons first went to stay with him, he had made the oft-repeated remark, and had then taken them to his own den. "I shall be delighted to see you here, Miss Fenton, as much as you like."

So it was ; for the first few weeks Lenore spent much of her time in the study, or her own boudoir. It seemed quite natural that she should do so, and listen to her father and his friend go over reminiscences of past years ; but that was only at first, she was growing to prefer the drawing-rooms, lifeless though they were. Lord Meredith would have followed her there, but he could not utterly ignore Sir James, who much preferred comfort and ease.

"Lenore would sit here if she were dull, my dear fellow. Do not put yourself out of your way for her ; she is used to being alone."

Sir James had found many old friends in town, and was perfectly contented. A quiet whist party met nearly daily in Lord Meredith's study. There was quite a laugh against Sir James, who in the old days had been well known for his high play. That was before Lenore's mother's time. The

spirit had returned to the empty, swept, and garnished house, and found it very comfortable.

As Sir James's acquaintance grew he gave less and less time to Lenore, so was much relieved when Lord Meredith proposed that an elderly cousin should come and pay them a visit of indefinite duration. It would give his daughter more freedom to come and go as she felt inclined.

Miss Griffiths was a subdued little spinster with a story. No one knew very well what the story was, but that did not much signify; the story was there, or at least Miss Griffiths believed so. She hugged her precious secret more closely to her, rejoicing in the belief that the slight mystery was interesting; and it made her a far more agreeable companion, as she sympathised deeply with all love affairs. In fact, poor Lenore began, after the first few days, to weary of the continued topic. That Lenore had some attachment that would tell sooner or later on her damask cheek was quite a settled fact in Miss Griffiths' mind. How otherwise could Lenore's complete silence on the subject of all individual men be accounted for?

A gentle flutter was at last felt by the anxious woman when Lenore mentioned that she must be home early one afternoon; it was the day following the opera, and Lenore expected Philip Jerningham to tea.

She would not have missed seeing him for anything. It was a pleasant reminder of her Christmas fortnight.

Lenore was in the drawing-room, Miss Griffiths was still putting a few finishing touches to her toilet, the door opened, and Philip was announced.

"I have brought an uninvited guest, Miss Fenton; but I hope none the less welcome."

Two men entered the room. Lenore rose to receive them. She could hardly suppress the start of pleasure as she greeted Jack Hunt.

"None the less welcome," she said. "I thought Mr. Hunt had forgotten us, as he had not been to see us before."

"I did not even know you were in town, Miss Fenton; so you must forgive my apparent negligence. My time has been very much occupied lately."

"Mr. Hunt has turned over a completely new leaf," Philip said. "There is not such another hard-worked man about. When I first knew him he was of some use, able to give some of his time to the exigencies of society. Now there is but one excuse, 'too much to do.'"

"Isn't it better than having too little to do, Mr. Jerningham. At least so it appears to me."

"Now if you are going to back Hunt up, there is no use of me saying anything more. You disap-

point me. I have been counting the hours till you came to town, Miss Fenton, for I was certain you would effect a reform. No wonder I fail, when another and stronger influence is at work."

"How you run on, Philip. A bystander would think you had but one more hour's speech allotted to you, and that you were making the most of it."

"Only one hour's speech in such society, and behold, even already it is interrupted."

The door opened, and Miss Griffiths entered. Jack Hunt looked annoyed. Here was a lynx-eyed duenna come to play spy. Philip, on the contrary, in a fit of good nature, remembering four were company, three were none, determined to make himself captivating to the new arrival. Miss Griffiths was sorely perplexed. To find two where she only expected one quite upturned her ideas. Which was the right one? What ought she to do? But the young people settled for her, though contrary to all her ideas. Philip, so bright and self-confident, ought to have claimed the attention of Lenore, but he didn't. Miss Griffiths found herself seated on the sofa beside Mr. Jerningham, whilst he engaged her in an amusing stream of talk. She could only look with despair at Lenore, whom she felt had fallen a victim to Mr. Hunt.

There was a slight embarrassment between Jack

and Lenore for a moment ; their last meeting was clear in the minds of both. Lenore, woman-like, was the first to recover.

" You have not asked after my father, Mr. Hunt. He has made a marvellous recovery."

" I was just going to do so," he answered ; " and your wrist, is it quite strong again ?"

" Oh ! my wrist was nothing. How did you ever remember it ?"

" I was not likely to forget it," he said. " It was the beginning of our friendship."

" I wonder," she continued, " if that accident had never occurred, should we have become such friends ?"

" Surely, yes. We must have met sooner or later, and then, whenever we did so, the end must have been the same."

" I am not the least so sure," she answered. Seeing her power, she could not resist the temptation of the moment. " At least I will not answer for myself. We should have met as strangers, with no mutual standing ground."

" We did meet as strangers, knowing nothing of each other. What mutual standing ground had we ?" His tone was vexed ; her remark had jarred on him.

" Oh ! accidents and help and gratitude, and all that kind of thing," she answered, carelessly. " It

must develop into friendship or acquaintance, or something of the sort."

"I suppose what you say is true," he answered, bitterly. "You are always right, and gratitude to many is a load under which they labour all their lives. It is in some natures not to be able to receive the smallest service without it being carefully weighed, and, grain for grain, paid back in full. The service I rendered was of the most trifling; the repayment will not take you long. I trust you will not suffer from the weight of the burden!"

"I beg your pardon; I was wrong in what I said. I trust," she continued, dropping her voice, "mine is not such a nature as you describe. It is the lowest grade of humanity which will not be in debt for kindness received—so utterly despicable."

"Miss Fenton, you misunderstand me; I was a brute to speak as I did. I did not for a moment dream you would take my bearishness home to yourself. What must you think of such a temper? You will be sorry I ever found out you were in town."

"Please do not say any more. I know it was my own fault. I will not try the atrocious temper again," she added more lightly. "Come, shall I give you tea—woman's panacea for all ills?"

"A very good panacea it is, Miss Fenton,"

Philip said, having heard the last sentence, and having had some difficulty in not hearing what went before. Miss Griffiths' slight deafness had been an admirable excuse for talking in a louder key than society usually warranted.

Miss Griffiths turned at once to Mr. Hunt. Here was the opportunity she wanted ; she effectually kept him in conversation until the quartette was joined by Lord Meredith and Sir James. Philip did not object ; having talked to the old lady for half-an-hour without cessation, he considered his good nature deserved some recompense.

Lord Meredith welcomed the young men with his usual courtly manner. He was delighted to see them as Miss Fenton's guests. He trusted the day was not distant when Lenore, as Lady Meredith, would be receiving a select party of friends at tea. He watched her with a quiet persistency which was not lost upon Jack, and anticipated her every wish. Lenore was vaguely conscious of a wish that he would not be so very attentive—it might be misconstrued by her old friends ; that anything more was intended, she would not for a moment allow to herself.

Sir James drank his tea quickly, paid very little attention to either Philip or Mr. Hunt, save asking a few commonplaces of Philip about Oxford, and supposed in a general way that Mr. Hunt was

very busy, and unable for much society. Then he retired to the study. He was out of humour, and did not care to be much in Lenore's company. His daughter had been watching anxiously a change coming over her father. It was no new thing; for more than a month his temper had been singularly easy to disturb. She could not understand it all.

Her face, usually so calm, clouded over for a few minutes after her father's departure. Both Lord Meredith and Jack exerted all their energies to chase away the shadows. They succeeded, however, or rather she drove her uneasiness from the field. Lord Meredith certainly shone in his own house; he charmed his guests, and Lenore too began to appreciate what manner of man he was.

But time was passing, and Philip had still some things to do before going down to Oxford; so, unwillingly, they rose to go.

"What chance is there of our meeting again?" asked Jack of Lenore. Lord Meredith was showing Philip some interesting marvel at the other end of the room.

"None, as far as I can see. I am not my own mistress."

"Have you done the galleries yet, or the water-colour exhibition? Might not I go with you there

some day? I must see you soon again. I have so much to tell you of my own life and plans, so much that may affect you nearly, if you will but listen to me, Lenore; and how can I speak in this man's house, who, if he knew what I would say, would never let me darken his door again. I cannot be false to him as his guest."

"You mistake Lord Meredith's feelings, Mr. Hunt; he loved my mother once. I am interesting to him as the child of her whom he loved."

"If that is all, he will more readily forgive me. I trust you are right. A woman's instincts usually tell her true in such a case; yet——"

A doubt flashed across Lenore as to whether she were dealing truly with herself, whether she were not stifling her real impressions; but she would not listen to the truth clamouring within her, the truth asserting itself with such unwelcome persistence, that what she was now doing was entering the gate of a rough path to happiness—a gate at which her father stood holding a drawn sword.

Why was it that only now, when her happiness seemed so close, did she for the first time realise to what the last few weeks had been tending? Her father's manner even was accounted for, his long absences, his continually throwing her into the company of Lord Meredith; it had all been

done with a meaning. Surely her father, her idol, was not willing to sell her for a coronet. Surely, behind, there must be some graver, stronger reason.

An awful feeling of impending fate seized her. She stood silent where she had risen from her seat to say good-bye.

Across the large room came a murmur of voices; for a few moments Lord Meredith was revelling in his antiquities. Philip never had been more interested; he was absorbed in the collection.

Lenore still was silent; Jack stood watching her; she did not know it. Her gaze went past him as they stood by the window. She saw and saw not the string of carriages slowly passing from the Park gates—Vanity Fair going home to refresh itself. Her eyes had a restless, hunted look in them; her whole soul was rising in rebellion, struggling against the net into which she had so unsuspectingly been led, the meshes of which seemed to be so closely round her.

Suddenly her resolve was taken. In a calmer moment she would not have acted so. Even now, her maidenly feeling made her hesitate a moment; but it was only for a moment. She must see Jack Hunt again, come what might of the meeting.

“I have not been to the water-colour exhibition,” she said. “I am going there to-morrow morning. Perhaps we may have the pleasure of meeting——”

"More appointments, Miss Fenton," said Lord Meredith, crossing the room. "I hope not for to-morrow. You remember you have promised to ride with me at twelve o'clock, and it is a pleasure I would not willingly forego."

"I have not forgotten," she answered. "Mr. Hunt was talking of the water-colour exhibition, to which I have not yet been, but I must try and make it out some day."

"I did not know you were so anxious to go, Miss Fenton; surely by this time you know, if you had expressed the wish, we might have accomplished it."

"You are only too good, Lord Meredith, in humouring my whims and fancies. It is a dreadful thing," she continued, laughing, "to get a character for exacting so much."

Jack held out his hand to say good-bye. Lord Meredith accompanied him to the door. When he returned, Lenore was at the piano, crooning to herself some favourite air. Miss Griffiths, well pleased with the afternoon's work, was sitting listening approvingly.

"Worthy woman," thought my lord, "I wish you had been anywhere but where you are just now."



CHAPTER IX.

SIR JAMES IN DIFFICULTY.

SIR JAMES was in Lord Meredith's study ; his lordship was in his business room. So the two men usually passed their mornings. Sir James had made an appointment with a lawyer for eleven o'clock. It was nearly that hour now, and he was awaiting uneasily the approaching interview.

A pile of letters lay before him, brought by the morning post — uncomfortable-looking epistles ; they might account for the wearied, harassed expression on the baronet's face.

He was interrupted by Lenore coming into the room, prepared for going out.

"My dear, where are you going at this hour of the morning ? I thought you intended to ride to-day ?"

"Not until twelve o'clock, Papa. I shall be home in plenty of time. Miss Griffiths and I are

going to the water-colour exhibition, the morning hours are so much the quietest."

"Very well; take care you are not late. Lord Meredith is so extremely kind. I would not have you appear to treat it all as a matter of course."

"When are we going to leave Prince's Gate?" Leonore ventured to ask. "We are surely paying a very long visit to a comparative stranger?"

"My dear, what nonsense. He is one of my oldest friends, or rather I have known him since he was a boy, as he is, of course, much younger than I am."

"Don't make yourself out such an octogenarian, Papa; but still, don't you think we have had nearly enough of this? I don't get half the good of you I used to do."

Her voice was very coaxing, but it only irritated Sir James.

"It is impossible, Lenore, to give way always to one's private likes and dislikes. I would not hurt Meredith's feelings for anything; and he is most anxious we should stay here as long as we find it convenient. I propose going down to Brighton the week after next."

"Still a fortnight of it," thought Lenore, as she closed the door, and went in search of Miss Griffiths, who shrewdly suspected there was more in the visit to the water-colours than met the eye.

After his daughter left, Sir James relapsed into his gloomy meditations, but they were not of long duration. A card was brought in with the name of Mr. Harvey on it.

"Show Mr. Harvey upstairs." Here was the man who was to solve the difficulties.

The man who entered was not an uncommon specimen of a class who have spent their lives in the study of human nature, more especially the business side of it. He took the measure of Sir James at a glance—that he was a gentleman there was no doubt. How far life had fitted him for a business man had yet to be proved.

"I have sent for you, Mr. Harvey," Sir James began, after the usual formula of seating themselves, and a few meaningless remarks had been gone through, "to ask your advice. I met with a severe accident some time ago which has prevented my going about as I should like. I must plead it as my excuse for troubling you to come here instead of calling on you at your place of business."

"Pray do not mention it. We, as a class, are but made to wait on our distressed brethren; it is to our advantage." Mr. Harvey gently inclined his head as he made the above remark. He was graciously pleased to put Sir James completely at his ease.

But the latter fidgeted with a paper-cutter lying on the table, laid his hand once or twice on a copy of the *Times* near him, and at last gained resolution enough to proceed.

“It is the old story, Mr. Harvey ; I want money. I do not mean to say I am a pauper, or that ruin stares me in the face. Nothing so bad as that ; and had it not been for that confounded investment, it would be all right.”

“Forgive me for the interruption, Sir James. I am an absolute stranger to you, save as friend of my client, Lord Meredith. It would be as well if you would go back to the beginning at once. Lay as much of your circumstances as you can before me, that I may the better be able to judge of your position. First, what of your patrimony ? Are you an eldest son ? Am I wrong in supposing your father was Mr. Fenton, the Q.C., who bought a pretty place down in Oxfordshire somewhere ?”

“You are right in what you state. My father was the Q.C. He made a deal of money, and bought Reesdale Manor, a fine property some hours’ journey from town. But you wish me to be clear in my statements. I begin, then, at the time when I left Eton. I was the eldest son. My mother—peace to her ashes !—was a weak woman, and had instilled into me, from her exalted opinion

of my capabilities, a very large idea of my own importance. My father, engrossed in business, did not see the mischief going on. He was as hard in character as my mother was soft, though always a perfectly just man in his dealings towards me. My other brother was his favourite. I was destined for the army; my brother followed my father to the Bar. From Eton I went to Christ Church. I had been brought up with big expectations; Oxford was not the place to reduce them. On all hands I heard my father was coining thousands. I was much made of, I would be a wealthy man some day. I bestowed my favours right and left, ran up bills to a very large amount, and before going into the army they must be cleared off. My mother acted mediator. My father was justly furious; he had given me a large allowance, I had trebled it in my yearly expenditure. We had some stormy scenes. It ended in my father paying my bills, getting me my commission, and turning me loose with threats to stop my allowance altogether if it were again overstepped. I then found myself the youngest man in a fast regiment. I was popular," continued Sir James, with a little bit of the old love of popularity rising in his tone—"very popular and easily led. I again ran into debt. My father heard of it, wrote me an angry letter, absolutely refused to pay up another

penny, and threatened to disinherit me. I believed it was only a threat ; I traded on my expectations. I was very hard pressed ; it seemed my only way of escape. I did it then under strong pressure ; it has been my curse ever since."

Sir James stopped a moment ; he was evidently a good deal upset with the narrative.

"A very common occurrence, I fear, Sir James," Mr. Harvey remarked. "The folly—or shall we call it the sanguineness?—of youth."

"The folly of youth is a mild name for it, Mr. Harvey—absolute villainy. It was ungentleman-like ; but the folly came to an end sooner than might have been expected. One fine morning I awoke to find a telegram stating that my father had a paralytic shock. The case was not hopeless, that was all that could be said. A letter from my mother followed by next post, begging me at once to go to her ; from something my father had said, she feared things were not all right for me. I started at once, but arrived too late ; my brother had closed my father's eyes. A second stroke had succeeded the first ; the end had been awfully sudden. The week preceding the funeral was one of discomfort to us all. My mother and I awaited the reading of the will with much anxiety. The day came ; it was as we feared. I had been absolutely passed over in my father's will save a very

small yearly allowance. Reesdale was left to my brother and his heirs unconditionally. There's not much to tell after that. I was a good deal knocked down at first, but as long as my mother lived I did not feel it so much; she stayed with my brother at Reesdale, and expended most of her spare money on me, her favourite son. I fell in love soon after that, and married—the mother of my only child. It may have been foolish, improvident, but to her I owe any good that is in me. I laboured all my life under the debt I had contracted, but my creditors were merciful. They considered I had been hardly used, so did not press me for payment. The rest the world knows pretty well. Through my wife's influence over me I became ambitious in my profession. I had a run of good luck, saw some active service, rose steadily in the army, got several staff appointments; in fact, were it not for that miserable debt, I should have been well off now."

"But," interrupted Mr. Harvey, "I don't exactly see how the case has become complicated, at least more than it ever was."

"Ah! there lies the whole thing. I have always been my own man of business, Mr. Harvey. I have always said, and perhaps foolishly, that if a man cannot look after his own interests, no one will do it for him. I know what you will say—

that a man cannot be master of all trades, and if I had stuck to my soldiering and let you do the money matters, it might have been different. Well, the long and the short of it is that, on leaving the army, I invested my spare capital—not much, after all—in an American investment which I see by the papers has so far collapsed. To add to this,” Sir James continued, hotly, “my brother, after leading a bachelor’s life for fifty years, married some eighteen months ago, and a son and heir has been born to him; otherwise I was my brother’s natural successor. We have always been good friends. If not to me, Reesdale would probably have gone to my daughter.”

“Then if nothing can be done with this invested money, I suppose your only income is the allowance settled on you in your father’s will. What may it be?”

“One thousand pounds a-year for my lifetime, and a provision made, in the case of my leaving children, of one hundred a-year to be paid from the Reesdale estates on my death to daughters until their marriage, or, failing that, for life, and a thousand pounds down to any sons there might be.”

“And you have but one daughter?”

“But one daughter, brought up, though not luxuriously, still with all her comforts. I have

been a fool!" exclaimed the Baronet, rising from his chair and restlessly "pacing the quarter-deck" up and down the study—"an arrant fool! And here!" he exclaimed, tossing one of the business papers to Mr. Harvey. "The worst has not yet been told. You see the substance of it. The man who writes is my principal creditor. He, too, it seems, has invested to a considerable extent in that American swindle."

"If I understand aright," said Mr. Harvey, putting on his spectacles and scanning carefully the document in front of him, "your creditor takes a more hopeful view of things than you do. He considers it merely the effect of panic, this sudden fall in your American shares. He demands higher interest in the meanwhile, and the payment in full of the debt as soon as things have righted themselves."

"But the interest, where is it to come from? Good God, how that cursed debt ties me hand and foot!"

Sir James paused in his impatient stride across the room; the perspiration stood on his forehead. He took out his handkerchief and wearily wiped it off.

Mr. Harvey slowly folded the unpleasant document, laid it carefully on the table, took off his spectacles; he had made as much out of it as he

could. So the two men remained for some moments.

"The money—where's the money to come from?" exclaimed Sir James, impatiently.

"Have you not some friend who would do you a neighbourly turn, and get you free of the old debt? It might be but a renewal of debt in another quarter, still you might get what you want at a rate of interest considerably lower than the one now demanded. Some man with spare cash might do it, and be contented with a return such as the Three-per-Cents would yield."

"But, confound it all, where's this generous go-between to be found?"

Mr. Harvey dropped his voice.

"Would not Lord Meredith do it for a friend—he has some loose capital at present?"

"Not for worlds would I ask him. Impossible, perfectly impossible," Sir James added, the last in a slightly doubtful tone. Mr. Harvey at once noticed the hesitation.

"Oh! I did not know it was impossible. From something his lordship let drop in casual conversation the other day, it struck me he might do it for a friend, such as you are, Sir James."

Nothing would induce me to receive such a favour, absolutely nothing!"

"Nothing?" interrogated Mr. Harvey.

There was a step in the passage outside ; a hand laid on the door ; it opened ; Lord Meredith was standing without.

"I beg your pardon !" he exclaimed. "I understood Mr. Harvey was gone. I am in no hurry ; my business can wait. When you are disengaged, let me know, Sir James. I want a few minutes' talk with you."

"Where's Lenore ?" asked her father. "I thought you were to ride at twelve o'clock."

"I met Miss Fenton on her way out, and we arranged to ride to-morrow instead."

Lord Meredith was about to absent himself. "Mr. Harvey, come to my room before you go. I wish five minutes' conversation on that piece of business we discussed the other day."

The door closed. Sir James and Mr. Harvey were again alone.

"If you will let me arrange it, Sir James, I think it could be managed without much fuss."

"Not for worlds ; utterly impossible. You must think of some other way of escape for me, Mr. Harvey. I have detained you too long already. Turn it over quietly in your own mind, and call back again the day after to-morrow about the same hour. Something may have struck us by that time—surely something will turn up.

"The old sanguineness, Sir James. However,

to-day we can do no more. We meet then on Friday, at eleven o'clock."

"At eleven o'clock," said Sir James, holding out his hand. "You know the way to Lord Meredith's business room."

"Well; good morning."

Sir James collapsed into a comfortable chair and drew a deep sigh, as if a disagreeable duty were more than half over. Mr. Harvey was soon with Lord Meredith, but his visit did not last long.

The door again opened.

"Then you will see that the money is ready for me to take up at a day's notice? I depend on you."

Such were the words Lord Meredith was saying as they came out into the passage.

"You may count on all being done as you wish. Good morning." The two shook hands pleasantly as they parted.

A one-horse brougham drove up as Mr. Harvey emerged on the steps. Miss Griffiths and Lenore alighted, and passed into the house.

"She will make a splendid countess," thought the man of business. "I was sure things were setting in that direction. Sir James may consider a fortunate star has risen on his horizon. There will be no more bother about the debt, and these American stocks will all come right, only give them time."



CHAPTER X.

EASILY SOLVED.

AFTER Mr. Harvey left, Sir James continued where he was; the momentary clearing of expression when the door closed behind the lawyer had passed away, and a settled gloom came over him. He saw from the window Lenore return from her expedition; he waited for a few moments expecting she would come to the study, but when, shortly after, the door opened, it was Lord Meredith who entered.

"Have you seen Lenore?" asked her father; "I expected she would have come here at once."

"I met her, and she gave an excuse of having some important things to do before lunch, and has retired to her own rooms."

"I suppose a woman's idea of importance, to sew a button on her glove, or some trumpery thing of that sort. Lenore's a good girl, but she's like the

rest of them in their ideas of the relative value of things."

"Hush! no treason against Miss Fenton, Sir James. I came to speak of her; you will be surprised at what I am going to say."

"She and you have not quarrelled on the subject of this ride? Some girlish freak made her go out at such an hour. I trust sincerely her thoughtlessness has not inconvenienced you."

Lord Meredith was leaning against the mantel-piece. He had not heard the last remark. He was gazing at a miniature of Lady Fenton, taken just before her marriage, with a strange, haunting resemblance to Lenore in the beautifully-cut features and the high-bred pose of the head.

Sir James, receiving no answer to his remark, looked to see what was engrossing his friend's attention. He did not break in on his reverie. He, too, fell into a moment's dream of long ago. The picture of his wife raised many memories. His old chum, Fred Barton, stood before him, the man whose one useless love had spoilt his life, and yet there was no trace of the spoiler's hand. At fifty, Lord Meredith looked a younger man than many another at forty. Over six feet in height, a slight spare figure, not a trace of grey in either his hair or his heavy moustache, erect as an arrow, with peculiarly careful attention to his severely

quiet dress, he gave one the idea of a man with whom the world had dealt kindly. His hands, so deeply marked and veined, playing restlessly with the bronzes on the mantelpiece, were the only thing indicative of any intense strength of feeling.

The silence was becoming oppressive, and Lord Meredith turned from the miniature and faced his old rival.

Sir James broke the silence.

"You see the likeness to her mother? It is very striking; but she is not so handsome, and has not got the same wonderful charm of manner."

"Has not she? I have not felt the want of it, Sir James. I suppose the truth will out, sooner or later; there is no fool like an old fool, they say. I love Lenore as I never thought to love again. I am here now to ask her from you, to obtain your consent to win her, if I can. My age is against me. Give me but your sanction to do what I can."

Sir James was silent; he had half expected this avowal, and yet when it came it took him by surprise; he hardly knew what to answer.

"You are surprised at the gross absurdity of the idea. You think that I must have lost my reason to propose marriage with such a child; that in the years long passed I loved the mother of this very child that I now would have as wife, and that I

have forgotten the seasons that have come and gone since then."

"No, no, Fred; it is not that. You were younger than my wife, and it has always grieved me that you did not marry."

"What is it, then? Is my age such an insuperable objection?"

"There is nothing against yourself, my dear fellow, but——"

"What would you say? Is it," he exclaimed, a light breaking in on him, "that Miss Fenton's affections are already engaged, or is it only that you fear I could not make her happy as a man more her own age would do?"

Sir James ignored the latter half of the question.

"No; utterly impossible. Lenore has never seen any man that she cares for more than her father—she is perfectly heart-whole."

"I fancied yesterday, but I may have been mistaken, that she liked that young Mr. Hunt who was here at tea. He is such a fine fellow, I could easily believe in her doing so."

"Hunt! The idea is preposterous. She hardly knows—saw him once for a fortnight; and besides, he has nothing, he cannot afford to marry. Put that idea out of your head. Lenore is heart-whole."

Lord Meredith gave a sigh of satisfaction. He

turned once more to the miniature, and happiness shone in every part of his face. It was of Lenore he was thinking, not of the original of the miniature.

Neither spoke. Sir James was summoning courage to tell that his daughter was a dowerless maiden, and he himself uncomfortably pressed for money; but he could not do it, it gave him the feeling of a money transaction into which his daughter was "thrown in," her personal worth being set against the sum borrowed. He wished that Lord Meredith had deferred his disclosure until a later date. He had cherished a lingering hope that, despite his protestations, Mr. Harvey might say something which, without drawing him in, would put the case before his friend.

Presently Lord Meredith broke the silence. He stood facing the mantelpiece, with his back towards Sir James.

"There is one thing I wish to say to you, to account to you for what may appear my extreme eagerness in pressing my suit. I gave you no warning of what was in my mind. I had not intended speaking for some days, until I had assured myself that I was in no way disagreeable to your daughter, or that I was only second in the field. On the latter point you have set my mind at rest. My request was hurried from something

Mr. Harvey said a few moments ago. You will understand the feeling that made me speak at once. I could not bear you should be under any obligation to me when I asked your permission to win your daughter."

"But let me understand what you would say. Are you aware——"

"I am aware of everything ; or, at least, as much as I care to know. After all, it is not much. An old friend is pressed for money. I have some uninvested capital at the present moment. You receive it as a loan, pay a moderate interest on it, such as I would realise by any of your good old-fashioned securities. I am satisfied with your word that it will be paid up some day. I need no more security."

"My dear fellow, it is really too much goodness. It is impossible to let you fetter yourself so for my sake."

"It is not all for your sake. Surely there need be no obligation on your part when I am taking from you what you most value."

"She's a very good girl, and will make a good wife, Fred, if she follows in her mother's footsteps. By-the-bye, have you said anything of this to herself?"

"No, nothing ; but having obtained your sanction, I will not longer keep my hopes to myself."

A sudden feeling that the answer might not be propitious made Sir James speak.

"You say you have not spoken yet. Then wait. We go down to Brighton next week. Come with us there, and then, when Lenore is out of the bustle of this town life, you will have more opportunity to let her see your real feelings. Do not startle her, Fred; she is very young yet. If she were taken by surprise, she might give an answer that she would afterwards repent."

"It shall be as you say. I shall not trespass more on your time to-day, Sir James. Wish me good speed before I go," and Lord Meredith held out his hand.

"With all my heart, old fellow; only I wish things had been different. It's all my accursed folly."

The two men wrung each other's hands, the one in assured happiness, the other with a skeleton forcing its way out of the cupboard—that things would not go so smoothly. More than once previously had Sir James found himself face to face with his daughter's will, and had been routed.

He sat some time alone, thinking it all over, and wishing the next fortnight were past, and that Lenore had given her word. It was impossible she could refuse such an alliance. Quite im-

possible, he argued against himself. Why, the coronet must be a temptation to such a girl!

And Lenore herself, what did she say? After parting from Jack Hunt the previous afternoon she went to her own room, and there, with no other voice to raise misguiding tones, the truth rose clearly before her. She was far too true a woman to shrink from acknowledging that she loved this man—loved him as only women of her calibre can love, with a depth and intensity which would glory in nothing so much as in the utter sacrifice of self, so long as it would in any way bring happiness to the object loved.

She would not hesitate to incur temporary coldness and displeasure, so long as she felt it was only caprice or prejudice; but if the voice of duty once asserted itself, even though it were death to her love, it must make itself heard. In a nature such as hers the lower must succumb to the higher.

The dinner-bell roused her from a delicious dream, a fond lingering over every look and tone of that afternoon's meeting, a thrill through her as once again she felt the electric touch of their hands meeting, and that subtle something had passed from one to the other telling how much they loved. She rose from her seat, slowly at first; she must complete her dream; then suddenly her footsteps

hurried. The meeting of the following morning came to her mind, and with it the rush of possible consequences. A shudder passed over her; she turned suddenly, as if conscious of some other ill-boding presence. Was it the staircase window that was open, and through which the evening air was straying, that made her tremble and turn cold, or was it the voice of fate?

There was no apparent sign of any disturbing influence as their host offered her his arm to conduct her to the dinner-table. Never had she been more perfectly charming. The morrow stood before her holding up a warning finger—this might be her last night of peace.

Lenore awoke next morning with the misgivings of the evening before dispersed. Daylight gave a more healthy tone to her mind; she was no heroine of ideal history, only a woman subject to all the unaccountable and nonsensical ups and downs of a woman's existence.

So when the sun shone brilliantly in at her window, it was sufficient to make the well of healthy life bubble over. Miss Griffiths, in the adjoining apartment, heard her singing as she moved about her room. A pleased smile flitted across her face even in the agonies of arranging her scanty tresses—once such a pretty brown, she often thought, and now so difficult to make the

dark hairs do their double share of duty in covering the grey ones—the light ones, she called them to herself. Poor old lady! It was only Lenore's song which made her foolish about the colour of her hair; and Lenore sang on unconsciously, "I love my love, I love my love because I know——" but she did not finish the line, but opened the door with a smile on her face, and ran down to delight Lord Meredith's eyes with her summer morning freshness.

Breakfast was over. Sir James retired for the before-recorded interview with Mr. Harvey, and Lenore and Miss Griffiths went to write letters before going out. Lord Meredith interrupted the former in the middle of her correspondence.

"Would you prefer to ride to-morrow instead of to-day, Miss Fenton? It is all the same to me, and would give you more time to see the water-colours?"

"How good you are, Lord Meredith! You are always thinking of others. If it is just the same to you," she continued with some slight hesitation, "I would rather ride to-morrow; but are you sure it is quite the same?"

"Do not hurry home," he said, as he saw her safely off with his cousin, "and will you look at a picture that struck me the last time I was there. You will easily find it. Tell me, when you return,

if you see a likeness that I see in it. It is called 'Yes or No?'

"I shall look for it; but I am so stupid about such things, that there is but little chance of my being able to discover any resemblance to anyone in it."

But Lenore was mistaken. The rooms were tolerably crowded when they arrived even at that early hour, and Lenore had some little difficulty in finding the picture; but she wished to see it at once, in case she went home having forgotten all about it. At last she stood before it.

"My dear!" exclaimed Miss Griffiths, "don't you see the likeness? It is your image, only older looking; and I hope never to see you so sad."

"I suppose it has a look of me," Lenore answered. "I wonder what it all means."

The corner of a quaint old room with a lattice window, through which the evening sun was streaming and falling on the figure of a girl sitting at a curiously-carved table writing a letter. The dress of the girl and the colouring of all the surroundings were kept in a subdued undertone, only a stream of light from the just setting sun fell on her face and hair, and lighted up a picture beside her on the wall. The letter was half written, the unanswered one open beside it; but the girl's

thoughts had flown from the letter to the picture in the sunlight ; her face turned towards it with such a depth of passionate feeling written on it, such a pleading for forgiveness in the eyes ! The subject of the picture beside her could hardly be more than guessed at. A figure of a man was all that could be said for certain, the light was too strong to distinguish more.

Lenore was fascinated with it ; she hardly heard the ripple of Miss Griffiths' talk discussing the probabilities of the subject, but a voice roused her at last.

"Dear me, Mr. Hunt ! You here at this hour of the morning ! I thought you were a man of so much business."

"I am only here for a short time, Miss Griffiths," he said, shaking hands with the two ladies. "Water-colours are very tempting, are not they ?"

"Are you an artist ? Perhaps you can tell us about this picture ? Lord Meredith asked Miss Fenton to let him know what she thought about it. Oh, there is my old friend Mrs. Hargreaves and her daughters. I must go and speak to them. Will you excuse me for a few minutes, Lenore ?" Miss Griffiths waited for no answer ; she was gone, and Jack and Lenore were left facing the picture.

"I wished to show you this myself," he said. "What do you think of it ? What is your idea of

the story? Is she writing to the original of the picture beside her?"

"Oh no; the sunshine would only have made her write faster. The light has taken her thoughts with it, and surely she is asking forgiveness for something she has done."

"You are right. I know the artist. The idea he wished to suggest was of a girl loving one man and accepting another. I am not sure if he has been successful. It is an intensely difficult subject. Do you see the likeness to yourself?" he continued. "I noticed it at once."

"So did Miss Griffiths. I did not know I was like that." Lenore turned away as if she would move from the place. Jack followed her.

"It is *very* like you," he replied; "only you would not do as she is doing. You would not love one and marry another?"

"Do not ask me. I cannot tell. The girl's face has told me so much, that I feel sure she was right in what she was doing."

"It couldn't be right," he exclaimed. "Do not say so, do not think so for a moment."

"Duty might demand the sacrifice of self," she answered. Her voice trembled, and Jack could hardly hear what she said.

"Why do you say this, Lenore? What has put such thoughts into your head? Do you not know

that I love you—that my only hope in this world is your love? Tell me quickly that you will give me yours in return. I will keep it very safely,” he added, with wonderful tenderness, “in life, in death, and in eternity.”

As once before he had let her voice speak unheeding of an answer, so now she let him tell his story as though she did not hear.

“Cannot you trust it to my keeping? I know I am asking a great deal—know that I am utterly unworthy of such a woman’s love; and yet, Lenore, I tell you the truth when I say I have never loved before, and it is not often you will receive the first and entire love of a man’s life given as unreservedly as I offer you mine. Will you accept it, or let it go?”

He put the question decidedly. There was less of pleading than of demand, more of master than of suppliant, in the form of his speech. Lenore raised her eyes to his; her face was expressive of intense happiness and rest; her eyes glistened from more than their usual moisture.

“If it is in my power to accept it, I will,” she said simply, “for I love you.”

Miss Griffiths was utterly forgotten. The half-hour together was very short, when Lenore, remembering to look at her watch, saw how time was fleeting.

"I must go," she said, "but let me have one more look at my picture."

Silently she stood before it; the expression on her face growing very sad and wistful as she imprinted it on her mind.

"Promise me," she said at last, turning to him and holding out her hand; "promise me this, that whatever I do you will always trust me. Remember that I have told you that I love you."

After that, they joined Miss Griffiths, and Jack saw them to their brougham, which was waiting for them.

"I shall be with your father to-morrow morning, early."

"I ride with Lord Meredith at twelve. Shall I see you before then?"

"Yes, certainly. Good-bye, Miss Griffiths. I have told Miss Fenton all about the picture; you must ask her for a minute description."





CHAPTER XI.

THE PRICE.

AS has been before related, Lenore and Miss Griffiths arrived at Prince's Gate just as Mr. Harvey left. Lord Meredith met them in the lobby, and it was then that Lenore offered the excuse that she had letters to write, and retired to her own room. She sank into a chair, too utterly weary with happiness to do anything.

She sat in a dream until she was summoned to lunch, and then the truth broke in on her that before dinner she had promised to say something to her father of Jack's visit the following day. He had begged hard that she would let him take the burden on his own shoulders, for both knew only too well how much opposition might be expected from her father. But she was determined on that one point. She felt she owed it to him, for until now they had been much to each other. Lenore had never really known Sir James; he was ideal-

ised in her mind, and very little of the ideal existed in the original.

She still continued to hold the doctrines instilled by her dead mother, lessons repeated so often that they had become articles of her faith—of the father in India, whose image the mother ever painted in more glowing colouring—leaving the world only when her twelve-year-old daughter had grown to hold her unknown parent as half-god, half-man. The creed of her childhood still clung to her; it was in this faith she could bear no other to tell him of the happiness which had come to her.

She knew Lord Meredith had an appointment for the afternoon; she would then find her father alone. She awaited the interview with a beating heart, and almost regretted the resolution she had made of herself breaking the news to him.

She found him, as she expected, alone. He turned and greeted her with more than ordinary warmth of manner.

“I wished particularly to see you, Lenore. I have been arranging with Meredith about our visit to Brighton. He was so unwilling to part company, that I have asked him to join us there as soon as convenient for him.”

“I should think he would find it very dull. What is there for a man to do? However, Father, if you like it, I am very glad.”

"Are not you glad for your own sake also? I thought it would be a change for you, instead of always having no other company than that of your father."

"I will try and be glad to please you; but, personally, it makes little difference whether he goes or stays. You know he is your friend, not mine."

"Lenore, are you blind? Don't you see that he wishes it to be of consequence to you whether he comes with us or not? He never thinks of me; it is entirely——"

"Stop, Father! I know now what you would say. But if I am right, what you wish is utterly impossible. I came here just now to speak to you, to tell you of something. You must hear me before you finish your sentence."

If Sir James had only known it, he could not have used a better spur to Lenore's faltering spirit than the mention of Lord Meredith, especially in connection with herself. Sir James sat in his easy chair, his spectacles resting on his forehead. Lenore stood beside him; she had the advantage of position. Her father was taken by surprise at her sudden outbreak; he felt by no means easy in his mind as to what was to follow. Lenore hesitated a moment to steady her voice. When she did speak, there was no hesitancy in what she said.

"I was at the water-colour exhibition this morn-

ing. I met Mr. Hunt there. He is coming to see you to-morrow."

"What do you mean, Lenore? You cannot for a moment suppose that I should understand that Mr. Hunt's visit has any connection with my daughter."

"Yes; his visit is in connection with me. He asked me this morning to be his wife. I told him that with your consent I would be so."

"My consent you shall never have. If you marry him, it is without it."

Sir James was startled into momentary passion. He recovered himself almost immediately, took the spectacles from their dangerous position, and waited for Lenore to speak.

"I suppose you know quite well that I would not marry without my father's consent, but I shall leave no stone unturned to obtain it. You cannot possibly withhold it," she continued, more passionately. "You can say nothing against him. You know as well as I do that you could not trust your daughter to safer keeping."

"I know as well as you do that Jack Hunt has not a penny to bless himself with, much less to keep a wife."

"He would never have asked me to marry him unless he could afford to do so; and, besides, I have money."

"From where did you gain your information?" said Sir James, with provoking coolness.

"I am your only child. I know what you have yearly allowed me. I do not suppose you would shorten my allowance when I would require it more than ever."

"You seem to take it all very much for granted. Perhaps you will be astonished when I tell you that I cannot allow you anything, and that it is absolutely essential that you marry money!"

"That I will never do. I would not sell myself. However," she continued, more quietly, "mercifully there is no question of that just now. If you at present withhold your consent, I can wait till you change your mind."

"You seem very certain of your constancy. But you forget that Mr. Hunt does not yet know the prize he has drawn is dowerless. He may not be so willing to wait as you suppose."

Lenore's eyes flashed, and hot tears came into them. She turned angrily away, and was about to speak. She controlled herself, however, and only said, "He shall answer that question for himself when you see him to-morrow."

"Lenore, this is absurd. You must hear reason. You need not speak of constancy and waiting and all that. My answer is given once for all. You must make up your mind; it will be far less pain-

ful for you to do so at once. Resistance is absolutely useless."

"But why?"

"Because, as I told you before, you must marry money. Only yesterday, Lord Meredith asked me for your hand. I heard him favourably. You see it is impossible to refuse such an alliance."

"It is not impossible. I will not marry Lord Meredith. I will not be sold for a coronet. Nothing will ever induce me to change. I love Jack Hunt. I declare I will marry no other."

"Not so fast, Lenore. You will be sorry you have said this some day. There are circumstances which require you should marry Lord Meredith."

"Circumstances is an ambiguous term," she answered. "What circumstances can ever affect me in such a case? You must be more definite in your expressions if you wish me to hear reason."

"Will you not take my reasons on trust? It is far better you should do so; any explanations would only make it more painful for everyone."

"And you expect me to be satisfied with this half knowledge," she answered, slowly bringing out word by word. "You expect me to quietly give up the man I love, and marry the man I don't care whether I ever see again. You expect me to do this without a reason. Remember, I am a woman, and in love."

‘Remember, you are little more than a child, and will soon grow out of it.’

Lenore did not answer. She had not herself under control; she was trembling all over from suppressed feeling. He father saw it, and pushed a chair towards her.

“You had better sit down,” he said. “When you can listen, I will speak.”

Lenore took the proffered chair; her knees would no longer support her. “I am waiting,” she said.

“Do you mean to say that you still hold to this ridiculous fancy, or are you willing to give up your will to mine?”

“Unless you can prove the fancy is ridiculous, I will never change. If you can give me what I consider a sufficient reason I will not marry without your consent, but I will also not marry anyone else.”

“Lenore, if I were to tell you that in days long gone by circumstances had arisen by which I became deeply involved in debt, that payment of the debt is now demanded, and that the money must be found somewhere or your father’s name will become blackened, what would you say?”

“But this cannot be! What do you mean? To whom is this debt due, and how was it contracted? If honourably, what disgrace, then, to speak of it?

And you could never have contracted dishonourable debt?"

"Lenore, do not ask. What is the use of it all? Do not you see how you pain me by dragging up the past?"

"But I must know all, must understand all." She rested her elbows on the table, and buried her face in her hands. She could not look on at the overthrow of her idol.

"The rest is short. The debt was contracted—no matter how. It is now due. A friend has offered to advance the money."

"And that friend?"

"Is Lord Meredith."

Lenore's breath came quick and short. Her face was terribly changed in expression as, after the lapse of a few minutes' silence, she looked up.

"I understand it now. I am to be sold for the payment of my father's dishonourable debts. I, your only child!" Her voice sounded hard and metallic. There was no life left to burst forth.

"Have mercy, Lenore. Do not you see you are killing me!"

I suppose women are not so easily killed. They are made of something which will stand more pain than men."

"Have you no pity for your father, Lenore?"

"Is the pity, then, to be all on my side? And

Lord Meredith," she went on, a ring of scorn coming into her hitherto lifeless tones, "how much does he know of this transaction? I suppose he also is quite willing to be a party to this bargain. He wishes a wife. He is not over young now. He thinks I would do well in that capacity, and is willing to offer a few thousands. If I am to be knocked down to the highest bidder, justice doubtless will give me to him."

"You misunderstand. Meredith knows nothing of this. He asked me for leave to win you before anything of this took place. It was only afterwards, hearing of my position from Mr. Harvey, that he offered to stand my friend."

"In what capacity—as your accepted son-in-law?"

"As my friend—hoping also the last might be true."

"Then you wish him to believe that I accept him willingly? I am to act a lie throughout?"

"He loves you, Lenore. There are few more worthy of your love."

"Providence has kindly interposed," she said, bitterly. "It is a mercy to be grateful for, considering I had no voice in the matter. It would have made but little difference who the purchaser was, if the money were duly forthcoming."

"You forget your lady-like feeling, Lenore."

"Do I? It is not unlikely. The school I am now in is not one to increase its growth." She rose to her feet. "I suppose I need stay no longer to-day. You will not expect me to appear at dinner this evening."

She swept past her father's chair.

"I shall see Mr. Hunt myself to-morrow morning, and let him know that you, not I, have dismissed him."

"It is impossible for you to see him. You would tell all. You would bring dishonour on me. And why is a folly of my youth to rise up against me now, when I have already paid so dearly for it?"

"Do you mean I am never to see him again?"

"Not till you are Lady Meredith. I will tell him to-morrow all that is necessary. I forbid you seeing him."

"I must see him once again. Oh, father, let me; I cannot part with him so!"

"Judge for yourself, Lenore. You can give me an answer to-morrow. I am willing you shall tell him all my disgrace, if it will bring any satisfaction either to yourself or him."

So they parted—Lenore to her own room. There is no use to follow her there; no eye ought to witness the struggle from which she rose victorious.

Her woman's love and her filial duty—one

against another. Such fights are passed through by all who have ever really lived—when the will must bend to the all-powerful will above.

Lord Meredith was full of anxious concern about the indisposition to which Sir James attributed Lenore's non-appearance at dinner. He recurred again and again to it during the evening. But it was not until they separated for the night that he gained any light on the subject.

"You see, I consider I have a right to inquire about her," he said, "since our talk of this morning."

"To tell the truth, Meredith, our talk of this morning has somewhat to do with it. We got upon the subject of marriage this afternoon, and I sounded her upon how your suit would be received."

"And is this the cause? I am disagreeable to her?"

"No, no. She was startled, surprised. She does not wish for marriage yet. She is very young, you know, and has always been so much her own mistress. Of course she gets a little restive at the thought of regular harness."

"The harness would be very light," he answered, gently; "but I am grieved, distressed, that she should have taken it so. What shall I do? Must I at once give up my dream?"

"No, no ; only wait. It will all come right ; but let her get used to the idea. Do not let your feelings be too apparent. I will take her away as soon as we can. We go to Mrs. Vivien Hill's dance the end of next week. We must stay for that, and will go down next day to Brighton."

"If you are sure this is what she would like best, let it be so ; of course you know better than I do. But, Sir James, it is her happiness, not mine, I seek."

"And you will find it if you only have patience. She is so young she does not yet know what she wishes."

"I hope she will be all right to-morrow. I shall feel terribly to blame if she is not."

"Never fear. A good night's rest always goes far to put a woman to rights and soothe her little tempers."





CHAPTER XII.

FINISHED.

WHEN days had passed since Lenore's interview with her father—days each longer and more wearisome than the last. She kept up her spirits bravely before the world, but alone her eyes looked dull and heavy, and her step lost its spring and elasticity.

Her father saw nothing of this, however, and he put aside the uneasiness that had grown up within him. She had taken the whole business much better than he expected. After their stormy parting he anticipated rebellion, or, if not that, at least that he would have to put up with much irritability of temper and to give way to numberless caprices.

But no; such would have been no relief to Lenore; she was far too deeply hurt to show it. Putting aside all her love for Jack Hunt, all that she had to endure in giving up her life's happiness,

her pride brought her acute suffering, though at the same time it stood her in good stead. To hide everything from outsiders was her one endeavour ; to shield her father from blame was something to live for.

Her feelings towards him had undergone a complete change ; all her blind love for him, and belief in him, had left her for ever, and at first had been replaced by hardly-fought-against scorn. She despised a nature that could let another suffer for it ; she turned with loathing from the caresses he showered upon her ; compensation offered, of such a kind, only made her feel it the more.

Such feelings had sway but at first. Gradually the woman's love of self-sacrifice made itself felt. To suffer for something weaker, poorer, less able to bear it, this was what she had to do. Her first duty was towards her father ; all else must be given up for this. Pity took the place of stronger feeling ; dislike turned to compassion : as woman condones ever the offences of those she loves, if the nature is smaller than her own.

She saw nothing of her lover in those first days of acute suffering—refusing all engagements previously contracted. She shunned every house in which there was a likelihood of their meeting. Her father used all his persuasions, but of no avail. It was not till the close of the following week that

she at last consented to be present at a dance given by Mrs. Vivien Hill some few miles out of town. She knew Jack Hunt did not know them ; she thought she was safe.

It was the day before their intended departure from town ; the miserable life she was leading was nearly at an end.

Lenore stood waiting for the carriage, attired in her opera cloak. Lord Meredith was to accompany them. He had not yet made his appearance. She was alone. Presently, Sir James entered the room.

He approached Lenore, and made some flattering remarks as to her toilette. She paid but little heed to what he said, and remarked that their host was late.

"He was speaking to me, which detained him, Lenore. Out of consideration for your feelings, I have withheld him from expressing his wishes to you. He knows nothing of the reason. I cannot longer make false excuses. You will make up your mind to hear him kindly, and I shall now give him permission to speak."

"Very well," she answered, quietly, "waiting can make no difference. I am ready to give my answer."

"I am thankful you take so reasonable a view of it, my dear."

Lord Meredith made his appearance, and they started for the drive of some miles.

As Lenore entered the ball-room, leaning on Lord Meredith's arm, there were many who whispered the gossip of their engagement as *un fait accompli*. She passed amongst the crowd. Which of them could have told that the smiles which lingered round her lips were occasioned by bitter satire of the hollow part she was acting?

Suddenly her gaze was arrested, a pair of eyes were bent on her across the sea of heads. The owner of the eyes was making his way steadily across the room. She trembled, and Lord Meredith turned to see the cause of her agitation.

Jack Hunt paid no attention to the noble lord; he hardly realised on whose arm she was leaning.

"You will dance the first waltz with me?" he said, very quietly.

"I cannot—forgive me."

Her answer was almost inaudible, and as he bent to catch the words, his eyes sought hers, reading in them the story of her love.

He turned from her without an answer. She thought he had left the ball. Some one of her usual partners claimed her hand; dance after dance she passed from one to another. Lord Meredith begged very hard for one. "Not to-night," she said. "I have so many to dance with, you must

forgive me." He did not renew his request, he knew his day was coming ; he went and joined her father in the card-room.

So the weary hours dragged heavily on, and Lenore's acting was almost past. The once densely-crowded rooms were beginning to look empty, dancing was at last possible, and to the enchanting strains of Strauss's waltzes some dozen or two of couples were floating round, forgetting everything but the delight of the moment, the thrilling music, the dreamy, gliding motion, the last dregs of the cup of pleasure.

The weary chaperones were, most of them, at supper, trying to pass the last half-hour of duty. Surely these poor, long-suffering mothers are worthy of more sympathy and appreciation than the verdict so often given of "scheming, manœuvring women."

They had not long to wait now ; daylight was forcing its way through the shutters ; the outside world was waking to a new day.

Softly rose and fell the strains of enticing, bewitching music, the air was laden with the scent of flowers, the hundreds of waxlights were burning low, but still the dancing continued. Lenore, worn out at last, had found a quiet corner behind some gauzy drapery. She anxiously awaited the moment of her release, when Sir James should

come and claim her. In the meanwhile, she was under the protection of Mrs. Vivien Hill, who, engrossed with her duties as hostess, had not observed Lenore's escape from observation.

Lenore, in a dream, watched the couples as they passed her. She could see and not be seen. She was wondering why Jack Hunt had taken his dismissal so quietly, wondering why he had come there at all, if not to meet her; her tired brain tried to untie the knot, but her mind was too weary to do more than fumble with the strings. She was conscious of some one entering the room, and then her screen was drawn aside, and her lover stood beside her.

"I have been looking for you everywhere. Come."

She rose at once and put her hand within his arm, and he led her away, out of the room, bright with flickering tapers, into the cool corridor, and so on through the conservatory to the terrace of the garden, and there he stopped.

So few miles out of town, and yet how perfectly lovely and country-like it was! At that early hour of the morning no sound of the harsh, hard-working world broke on the stillness of nature; too far from the house even to hear the sound of revelry within.

There was a seat some few yards away. Jack

led Lenore towards it. She was thankful to sit down. A strange, faint feeling was creeping over her; it was all so unreal. He did not seat himself beside her, but stood gazing down on her, intense love and admiration expressed in his face. No wonder; she looked very beautiful in the soft morning light. Her white dress fell in soft folds round her; her neck and arms were jewelless save for the string of pearls which encircled her throat; her rich brown hair was coiled simply round her head; her hands toyed nervously with the fan lying on her knee. Surely if there is power in magnetism she would have raised her eyes to his. But no; only an almost imperceptible tinge of crimson stole over the marble-like whiteness of her face.

“Have you nothing to say to me, Lenore? I brought you here hoping you would tell me something which would explain your conduct of to-night. Why in a few short hours have you so utterly changed? why did you refuse to dance with me? why, after all that has passed, have you acted so?”

Still she did not speak, but the crimson deepened on her cheek. Once more he impetuously broke out—

“Do you think I am made of marble, Lenore? Do you think I am without feeling? Do you

think I can stand calmly here and measure my tones to society's words and phrases, when she who only one week ago promised to be my wife sits as though she heard not, refuses one word of explanation even to the man who was fool enough to believe that she loved him? I did not think you would have done this, Lenore—you, whom I thought above all other women—have turned out to be heartless, a flirt, ready to sell yourself for a coronet!" His voice rang with scorn, and he turned from her.

"How dare you speak so to me?" she exclaimed, rising from her seat. "How dare you attribute motives such as these to me, Mr. Hunt? Do you think if it had been as you say I would have come with you here? If I were the promised wife of another, if I were absolutely heartless, I would have shunned all opportunity of explanation."

"And what explanation can you give, Lenore? I could bear with so much from you."

"You will have to bear much," she answered wearily, sinking into the seat from which she had risen in the first burst of her anger. "You have a right to think ill of me, for I cannot explain. Oh! will you not trust me? will you not believe that my love for you is now as it ever was? and yet our marriage can never be, for I must live and strive to forget this love that at present is part of my

very life. I cannot keep it longer, for it would be sin."

Her voice had sunk almost to a whisper. In the silence a blackbird poured out a gush of melody—the world of nature glowing with thanksgiving and happiness; only two human hearts, torn with love, at discord with it all.

"You mean you are about to marry Lord Meredith, and that you, in your integrity and icy calmness, will then uproot all your now avowed love, because such things are not according to your religion. I care not for these things; the religion that would separate us will never number me amongst its votaries. I am not the stuff they made martyrs of. Why must this be? I swear that unless it is your own wish, nothing shall ever come between us. God forgive you if you are playing with me, Lenore; but you are driving me mad."

"And do you think it costs me nothing? Do you imagine that the suffering is all one-sided?"

"If you also suffer, why must this be? I have a right to an explanation. Is it your own wish or your father's that all should be over between us? If your own, I will say no more; if your father's——"

"It is I myself that wish it, Jack. It is I who say and know that it can never be; but oh! pro-

mise me that you will not let this wreck your life, that you will remember that there is something higher, better, truer to live for than human love."

"You told me once," he answered her, "that you could not be the rope that would save a man. Fool that I was not to believe you!"

"But believe me now!" she exclaimed. "I told you that though I had no saving power there was One who had. You must live your life nobly, live down this pain, and when you have succeeded in this, look around for the nearest duty and do it. But why do I tell you all this, save that I love you so—why, when my own heart is breaking?"

She buried her face in her hands and gave way to a passion of grief. Jack, who at her first words had turned from her, now, as her sobs struck on his ear, once more came close to her. Her slender form was shaken with the torrent of her sorrow, and into his face, so stern and unforgiving a moment since, swept a smile of deepest love. Yes; though he believed that she was behaving cruelly to him, he could not resist the impulse, and, taking her in his arms, he pressed passionate kisses on her lips. For a few moments she gave herself up to his love; but there was a sound of approaching footsteps in the shrubbery, and, throwing her arms round him, she gave him one long, unasked for, first and last kiss, and fled.

Terror lent her wings, through the conservatory, the corridor, and into the cloak-room. There she paused, considering what to do next. A servant appeared in the doorway. "Will you find Sir James Fenton for me?" she said. "Tell him his daughter is waiting for him here."

Sir James was in the card-room, but rose at once at his daughter's summons, and met her in the hall. As she advanced to meet him, he was struck by her extreme beauty, the glowing colour of her lip and cheek, the almost dangerous sparkle of her eyes.

"My daughter keeps me in wonderful order," he said to Lord Meredith, who accompanied him.

"Miss Fenton's slaves cannot complain of their task-master," he answered, as bowing low he offered Lenore his arm to conduct her to her carriage. She drew back haughtily, but at a glance from her father, more of entreaty than command, she placed her hand on his arm.

"I hope you have enjoyed to-night the last dance of the season, and that you will leave town to-morrow with pleasant remembrances of it all?"

Lord Meredith turned to Lenore for an answer. She must say something.

"Mrs. Vivien Hill deserves warm thanks for all the trouble she has taken. It has been a brilliant ball."

"You have really enjoyed it? I am glad."

She gave no answer, but looked up, to meet the gaze of Jack Hunt riveted on her. He was standing in the doorway waiting for her to pass. His expression was not pleasant. He had overheard Lord Meredith's last words.

Her eyes pleaded for forgiveness as she held out her hand.

"Good-bye," she whispered.

"Good-bye, Miss Fenton. Allow me to congratulate you on the pleasant ending to your stay in town."

She almost called out from pain as her hand was for one moment held in his; it was only her diamond ring had cut her finger.

In another moment she was in the carriage, hardly conscious of anything.

Lord Meredith had returned to the house for something he had forgotten.

In a dream she heard her father's voice, "It's all right, my darling Lenore; you have saved me. Lord Meredith is coming down to Brighton next week."



CHAPTER XIII.

BEGUN IN BITTERNESS.

YACK returned to his rooms, but not to rest. A pile of books, ready for review, lay on his table ; they must be reported on within the next few days. He sat himself down at once to write. Slashing criticisms they were which came from his pen in those first hours after his parting with Lenore ; but the work suited him better than any other would have done ; it occupied his mind, and prevented him from dwelling so much on his own loss of happiness. Of Lenore he did not think at all at first, save as of a woman in whom he had been woefully mistaken, who had gone to fulfil her destiny by marrying birth and wealth. Of course, she would be happy ; she had got all the world could give. So days passed on, and his feelings did not change.

The strength of her influence over him for good

acted only more strongly in the opposite direction; his faith in her had been such, that now, when he thought she had failed, he was inclined to throw all her lessons to the winds. The world was a sham; what seemed good and fair was even more dangerous than that which was outwardly unsightly. He had believed in her, and had been deceived. He certainly would not commit the same fault twice.

And yet with an unaccountable and ever-increasing desire his steps carried him once more to the Picture Gallery. How vividly his meeting with Lenore was in his mind as he stood before her duplicate in the picture of "Yes or No?"

"I did not know I was like that," she had said; and he answered her, "You are very like it, only you would not have acted so;" and contrary to all his expectations she had done it. How intensely the girl's face in the water-colour reminded him of Lenore, as when, that night, she had wished him good-bye at the Vivien Hills! The same pleading for forgiveness in the eyes, the same wistful sadness of expression. He returned to his lodgings none the better for his hours spent in useless retrospect. His landlady met him at the door. A gentleman had been calling while he was away, and finding that he was not at home, had gone up to his rooms and written a note.

Jack recognised Phil Jerningham's writing as he raised the missive from the table.

"DEAR HUNT,

"Sorry to find you out; called to know if you will go down with me next week to B——shire. There is a dance at Sir Roger and Lady Mainwaring's. All the houses round are making up parties, and I am going to stay with the Romneys, at Romney Manor. The son is at Oxford with me; they wanted another man, and I asked for an invitation for you. You had better get rid of your writing for a couple of days. Household not at all formidable—father, three girls, and Tom, the son. I'll meet you in town, and we can go down together. You had better say 'Yes.'—Yours,

"PHIL JERNINGHAM."

"'Household not at all formidable,' so Philip thinks. Well, I'll see about it when the time comes."

Jack tossed the note into the unanswered letter-basket, and sat down to work. His room felt stifling; the sunshine which forced its way round the edges of the window-blind served only to illumine a dust-laden atmosphere. He rose impatiently from his seat and threw up the window.

The dust was displaced, and the air blew in hot and unrefreshing. A vision of trees and grass, even for a couple of days, was refreshing to his weary spirit.

"I think I'll go," he said, and then he wrote to Philip Jerningham accepting the invitation.

So it was Jack Hunt first came to know Grisel Romney.

She had only arrived from school the preceding day, and was still in all the whirl and pleasure of home-coming—the delight of being with them all again, the picking up the broken threads of last year's existence, feeling still a child in the keen enjoyment of her old amusements, and ever and again remembering she was grown up now, and that this very evening she was going to her first ball. All day long her flow of spirits had continued, first chattering to Sybil in her studio, and then invading her father's sanctum, and carrying him off to the stables and kennels; and at last, returning about five o'clock to the house, she caught sight of a well-known figure standing at the glass door which led from the girls' sitting-room into the garden.

It was in this room that, every afternoon, the tea-table was set, and Mr. Romney came in regularly for his cup of tea, and brought with him whoever might be within reach. Sometimes Sir

Roger Mainwaring, when the two had been farm-inspecting together; sometimes the Rector, who enjoyed nothing better than a half-hour's chat with Mr. Romney's pretty daughters among the flower-beds.

But neither the Rector nor Sir Roger was there to-day, and Grisel was alone with her father when they entered the garden.

"There is Tom," she exclaimed, as she caught sight of the before-mentioned figure.

Tom turned at the sound of her voice, and in a moment she was beside him.

"Well, my old boy, I *am* glad to see you. Tom, there is something odd about you," she added, gazing at him contemplatively. "I see now what it is! Allow me to congratulate you."

"On what, La Grise?"

"Why, your moustache, of course."

"Do you approve of the acquisition?" he answered, laughing. "You must come and be introduced to Mr. Hunt, and to an old friend of mine also—Philip Jerningham."

Bryde was pouring out tea as Tom and Grisel entered. The roses on her cheeks vied in colour with the roses in her waistbelt, as she laughingly fought a battle on the merits of sugar and no sugar with Philip, and they were engrossed with each other. Only Jack, standing in the background,

overheard the brother and sister's meeting, and watched with a passing curiosity for the figure from which had proceeded those low, mirthful tones.

The introductions were over ; Mr. Romney had cordially welcomed the two men to the Manor, and they had seated themselves round the tea-table. That Bryde was very handsome and Grisel insignificant beside her was Jack's first opinion, arrived at with a feeling of amusement that he should care to form an opinion at all ; that there was an indescribable something about Grisel which made him watch her—that he had been mistaken, and she really was nice-looking—was his conviction after his first hour's acquaintance.

Yet she had not addressed three words to him—in fact her conversational powers seemed to have vanished with her entry into the house. Bryde kept the ball going ; she had enough to do between Mr. Jerningham and her brother, both intent upon drawing out her lively sallies. Sybil had disappeared ; some flowers had to be gathered, and, engaged all day at her easel, she had forgotten them. Grisel made a show of following her, and there was a general move in the direction of the garden.

Jack felt he must rouse himself. A desire to be unsociable was creeping over him, a feeling of want

of harmony with everything—it was stale, flat, and unprofitable.

He turned to Grisel, who, with her arm linked through Tom's, was next to him.

"Is this to be your first ball this evening, Miss Romney?"

"Yes; I have never been anywhere before, except once to the opera."

"Then you are going to taste a completely new experience. You must tell me to-morrow your impressions."

"Oh, I can tell you now. I know I shall enjoy it all, because, you know, I am so fond of dancing!"

"Then it is to the dancing that you are looking forward. You are sure in that case to enjoy yourself."

"But isn't dancing the principal thing? If I dance everything, I cannot help enjoying it." Grisel paused a moment. A puzzled expression came into her face. "What do you go for?" she asked.

"Simply for the dancing. What other reason can there be?"

She looked straight into his eyes as he spoke, trying to read in them some contradiction to his words.

"I do not think you mean what you say. You seemed surprised when I said the same word a

minute ago. Perhaps you go to see your friends. Is that it?"

"I have no friends, Miss Romney."

"Neither have I. I shall know no one there this evening. Oh yes, I forgot; I have one great friend, but one isn't very many."

"I cannot even aspire to one. You should consider yourself fortunate to be able to reckon on one true friend."

"I am sorry for you, Mr. Hunt, for then I fear you will not enjoy yourself, as you do not care for dancing."

"I shall watch you," he said, "and perhaps, when this very true friend has had all the dances he wishes, you will let me have one, and we shall see if we can waltz together."

"My great friend is only Reggie Mainwaring," she said. "He is my make-believe brother, and if you would like it, I should like very much to dance with you."

Tom, until now, had been absorbed in tossing his cane for his dog to go after, and had taken no part in the conversation; at Reggie's name he stopped his amusement for a moment.

"Have you seen Le Gris to-day, La Grise?"

"Not yet. We are to meet to-night and dance the very first dance together. Do you know, Mr. Hunt, I have been engaged for the first dance for

a whole year now! Do you think you could have remembered, had you been me?"

"At your age, yes! When you grow older, you will find constancy an exploded idea. It does not coincide with our nineteenth-century notions. A week is generally too long for such a thing to last."

"I hope I shall never grow old," exclaimed Grisel, warmly.

"I hope you never will; but I fear a year after this you will echo my sentiments."

"But a promise! I never could break a promise. Could you, Tom?"

"*Cela depends*. I wouldn't answer for myself."

"I would," she said. "I would never break my word willingly."

"I have heard such things before," Jack said; "and yet, Miss Romney, a week is a long test for our humanity to stand."

"Are you a cynic, Mr. Hunt? If so, and we are to be friends, you must forget about it for the next two days. Remember, I am holding Eve's apple only in my hand. Do not make me taste it yet. I do not wish to find out the ashes. I will not do it, in fact; so you need not try to open my eyes."

"The knowledge must come sooner or later; it is not such a sharp awakening if you get over it early. It's like teething, the sooner you are done with it the better."

"Much you know about teething," said Grisel, laughing.

"Oh, don't I, when I have suffered agonies with my wisdom teeth!"

"You do not mean to tell me seriously, Mr. Hunt, that you really have got your wisdom teeth? I should not have thought it."

Tom gave a low whistle of amusement.

Jack regarded the girl between them with an increase of curiosity.

"Don't cut your wisdom teeth too soon, Miss Romney; you are happier without them."

Four hours later the party were assembling in the drawing-room. Jack was ready early, and expected to be the first on the scene; but Grisel was already there, fluttering about in a fever of excitement.

"I do wish they would be quick; I am so afraid we shall be late."

"The omnibus is not here yet, so you need not make yourself unhappy, Miss Romney. Are these real or artificial?" he asked, touching the white heath and fern which nestled amongst the clouds of airy tulle."

"Real," she answered, "they were sent to me an hour ago, with this. Isn't it lovely?"

She held up the perfectly pure Covent Garden bouquet, almost heavy from the smell of Cape jasmine and rare exotics.

"It *is* beautiful. What happiness to have a great friend, Miss Romney!"

"It was very good of Reggie sending it to me; but why do you speak so oddly about him, as if you hardly believed he were my friend?"

"Because I think friendship a snare and a delusion. Your nearest and dearest are often foes in disguise."

"Some one must have used you very ill once upon a time. I am very sorry for you, Mr. Hunt."

"Oh dear, no, Miss Grisel! In a few years you will know it is the creed of half the world, and it is an evil easily rectified—have plenty of friends; so when the time-being beloved one fails, select the next best to supply his place. These fair-weather friends are easily got; the thing becomes nearly impossible when clouds are about."

"If I were to judge you by your description of yourself, I should dislike you very much, and still somehow I don't."

"Don't you?" he said, smiling at her candid opinion. "I hope you will keep your favourable impressions."

"And prove there is such a thing as friendship," she answered. "I am ready to fulfil my half; but, remember, if you are going to take me up as a friend, I will not stand being put aside in ten days or a fortnight."

"All right; then I submit to your conditions, and I, on my part, promise not to be the first to tire of the bargain. My experience tells me that you will give in first."

"Now, Mr. Hunt, I will not allow one of my friends to speak so. I will have no sarcastic remarks made, at any rate this evening."

"What are you two about?" asked Tom, sauntering into the room at the moment.

"Swearing an eternal friendship, Tom," said Grisel. "Look what I have got for my boy. Let me put it in for you?"

Grisel stood on tiptoe and pinned it in the button-hole for Tom.

"Thanks, Grisette. A sister is even better than a friend, Hunt. I have fared better than you."

"Mr. Hunt shall have one also, if he cares for it. I did not think he would."

"What made you think that, Miss Romney? It would give me pleasure to wear one if you will put it in for me."

"I thought you were not in humour for flowers," she answered; "but I am glad you like them."



CHAPTER XIV.

ORANGE BLOSSOMS.

LADY MAINWARING stood at the door receiving her guests. Not at all a beautiful woman, and yet her son watched her proudly; he thought she held her own amongst the matrons present. He had told her to wear her black velvet and diamonds, and she did it, because he always got his own way, she said.

A perfect type of a high-bred woman, she never showed to more advantage than in her own home putting everyone at their ease. "Lady Mainwaring is a charming hostess," was an often-repeated verdict.

"Has she come yet, Mother?" Reggie asked. He had been obliged to abandon his watch-post at the door, and feared, in the interval, he had missed the Romneys.

"Not yet, Reggie; but they cannot be long now. I asked Sybil to come early."

Meanwhile, Grisel was beginning to look very shy as she passed through the brightly-lighted passages on her way to the ball-room. Suddenly, her hand was clasped in a very warm pressure.

"Here you are at last. The first dance is ours, you know. The music is just beginning, and you must come to open the ball."

He led her up to his mother with an air of possession. "Here she is, Mother."

"How do you do, Grisel? I am very glad to see you again. Where are the rest of your party?"

"Reggie met us in the passage, and hurried me away from them. Have I done wrong in leaving them?"

"No, dear child; you are quite safe with Reggie. Now go and enjoy yourself; you know this is all in your honour."

Round and round flew Grisel; dancing came to her almost by inspiration. She uttered an exclamation of intense enjoyment as they stopped.

"Let us go into the conservatory, La Grise; we can rest there for a few minutes. You must not tire yourself at first; and besides, I have not seen you yet."

"I am not a bit tired, Le Gris; but, if you like, we may sit down for a minute or two. Only, do not go to the conservatory, as I do so like watching everyone."

They found a seat in one of the windows, and Grisel pushed aside the muslin curtains that fell between her and the dancers.

"Reggie, I did not think it could be half as nice as this. If every ball is like it, how much I shall enjoy them!"

"Are you pleased, La Grise? What dances will you give me to-night?" he said, raising the ball card from her knee. Several were already promised to the home party, and Reggie took possession of the remaining round ones. Grisel's satin slippers tapped restlessly on the floor.

"We are wasting our time, Le Gris," she said.

He smiled at her impatience, but did not stop again until the waltz was over. It was pretty generally known that the dance was in honour of Mr. Romney's youngest daughter; so when, at last, the music ceased, Grisel found herself surrounded by many claimants for dances.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Grisel?" asked Sybil, passing at the moment.

"Very much. I am engaged for every dance. Where is Bryde?—have you seen her?"

"She is with Mr. Jerningham somewhere. Do you wish to find her?"

"Oh no; only curiosity!"

The hours ran on. Grisel had never ceased dancing, and the evening was nearly over. Mr.

Romney was getting restless, and spoke of going home, but the Mainwarings would not hear of it. Jack Hunt came up to claim a dance with Grisel, and she escaped, laughing, from her father's expostulations.

"Has it come up to your expectations?" he asked.

"Far surpassed them. I have had a perfect evening."

"I wonder how many years it will take before you become *blasé*. Do you think if we meet ten years after this you will have grown weary?"

"Ten years is such a long time off, I cannot tell. I shall be twenty-seven by that time, nearly too old to care for any fun; and besides, you know, in ten years I may be——"

"Married!"

"I was going to say dead."

"My word is best," he answered. "Though, if truth be spoken, I am not sure if yours is not the happier ending."

"I shall not come to you, Mr. Hunt, for congratulations when I am engaged. Only, that is in all probability at such a remote period that even our eternal friendship may have worn out."

"Why do you put your happiness at such a distance? You are still in the first wonder!"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Do not you know a young lady's three wonders? From fifteen to twenty she wonders who she'll marry; from twenty to twenty-five, who will marry her; and from twenty-five to thirty, will she ever be married at all."

Grisel broke into a laugh.

"You are very rude," she said. "Never mind, I shall forgive you, provided you do not let any more of this delicious waltz slip away."

"I beg your pardon; I forgot you came entirely for the dancing, Miss Romney."

"I have found out that dancing is not the only nice part of a ball," she said; "but I like a judicious mixture."

"You look as if you had had enough of it for one evening," Jack said, as shortly afterwards he led her to a seat.

"Yes, I am very tired now. It is nice to rest."

"I see your father in the distance with your sisters; I fear he is coming for you," Jack remarked.

"I *must* wait for one more dance; I promised to do so. Please, make Papa stay, Mr. Hunt."

Mr. Hunt went with the request, and in a moment Reggie was at her side.

"Come, Grisette," he said, "this last is mine, you know."

"I am so tired, Le Gris. Will you take me to the conservatory now?"

Reggie looked at her anxiously.

"You have been doing too much. Come and have some champagne, and then I will find a comfortable place where you may rest."

She laid her hand obediently on his arm—she was too tired to remonstrate—and soon she found herself in the corner of a sofa amongst the flowers.

"Do you remember the last afternoon we were together, La Grise?" Reggie asked.

"Yes, of course I do! When you rowed me up the river. How lovely it was! How I enjoyed it!"

"If I come to-morrow to the manor, will you come out on the river again, and renew old days?"

He asked the question eagerly, and Grisel turned upon him a pair of laughing eyes.

"I do not think I will," she said.

"Why?"

"You wish it too much."

"And suppose I do confess that I wish it very much, is that a good reason for your saying no?"

"Extremely. What people wish they ought not to get. I am growing wise, Le Gris, with advancing years."

"You must promise you will come; you are not going to refuse my only request to-night, La Grise?"

"For shame! Is that generous? And somehow I think you have been making requests all this evening which you have had gratified; so I will not promise. What is that delicious scent?" she added, starting up from her seat and going in search of the plant whose fragrance had attracted her. Reggie followed her.

"It must be somewhere near. How sweet the air is all around!"

"You are under it, La Grise," he said, smiling.

She looked up at the plant growing beside her; the blossoms were above her reach.

"What is it, Le Gris? Do gather me a spray."

He mounted on the chair beside her, and broke two of the creamy bunches of blossoms.

"Let me put it in your hair," he said, nestling one of the sprays lightly amongst her coils. He stood back a moment admiring his work. "Now your dress is perfected, my queen."

"What have you done, Le Gris? How can you be so foolish! What is it? Give me the other spray."

She held up her hands to try and snatch it from him, but he held it far out of her reach.

"I cannot give you this; I am going to keep it. Perhaps I will let you have it some day. Your piece is in your hair."

"Oh, Reggie, you should not have done it!" she

exclaimed, as, disentangling the flower from her hair, she discovered what it was. "Orange blossom is only meant for a bride. I have no right to wear it."

"Never mind, La Grise. I could not help it; it was all your dress wanted. Let it stay there for to-night."

"How silly you are, Le Gris!" but she did not stop him, as once more he arranged the blossoms in her hair.

"We must go back to Papa," she said. "It is time for us to go home."

"Wait a little longer; they will come for you when they wish to go. I wish to hear all about yourself. What have you been doing lately?"

"At school, nothing but improving my mind; since I came home, nothing interesting, except that Mr. Hunt and I are going to be friends."

"What happiness for him, La Grise! And how long is the friendship to last? To eternity, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes! I made him understand I was not to be dropped whenever he was tired of me, and he says I shall probably tire first. But really, Le Gris, we must go now."

"You have not yet given me a promise that you will come on the river to-morrow."

"How can I? My time is not my own. Remember, we have visitors staying with us. I must consult their wishes."

"And make them your own, I suppose. It is quite natural, La Grise, that your new friends should take up your time."

"Reggie, listen to me, and do not be so foolish. You speak as if you thought my new friends were going to push the old ones aside; but you are absolutely mistaken; nothing can ever make me different to you. Remember, we have been like brother and sister for years. I will come with you on the river to-morrow; but you must not speak like that again, for you hurt me."

"Do I, child? I did not mean to do so. Come away, little sister, then. Your father is making signs for you."

"Good night, Reggie," said Grisel, as he put her safely in the carriage. "I have had such a happy evening. Thank you for it."

They were all very tired and sleepy, and the drive home was a silent one. They had not far to go, and the two miles were quickly passed.

Grisel was the last to leave the carriage, and Jack stood at the door to help her to alight.

"You have enjoyed yourself very much, have you not?"

"Yes, intensely," she answered, and passed him into the house. She turned before leaving the entrance hall; his voice attracted her.

"Here are some of your flowers, Miss Romney," he said.

"Thank you so much. It must have dropped out of my hair. Reggie put it in this evening. He cannot have fastened it very firmly."

"It is orange blossom," he said, as he gave it into her hand and met her laughing eyes.

"Is it? Thank you for telling me." Her eyes met his quite frankly. "Good night—or rather good morning," she said, and ran upstairs.

Jack turned from the doorway and lit his cigar. The morning was delicious; the sun had risen and flooded everything in light. He strolled along the pathway. He was alone—the rest of the party had gone to their rooms.

A scene of the past rose to his mind; not so very far distant either. A garden terrace. A girl dressed in white, with neck and arms snowy as Grisel's. The time early morning, the sun just risen, the birds awaking. She, too, had passed from him, leaving him alone outside. Grisel he would meet fresh and bright at breakfast next morning. What of that other? His brow contracted for a moment; he kicked a pebble sharply from his path.

"I am a fool! Why cannot I forget her?" he exclaimed.

"Because you never will," answered a voice from somewhere. He started. Was it only his own conviction making itself thus loudly heard?

"I am determined to forget. I will take her own way of doing so. Surely there is more than one woman in the world, though coronets may not be plentiful as blackberries."

"You will make no other woman love you, you have given yourself so completely away. You will find it impossible." His thoughts argued on, utterly regardless of their disturbing influences. "Wait with patience; things may yet come right. 'Marry in haste, repent at leisure,' says an old axiom."

"I will not wait," he muttered. "If I find out sooner or later that I have made a mistake, so will she. I may not make another woman love me—so much the better. Another woman might deceive me. A child is different—she would not demand the same kind of devotion. Some wise man or woman once wrote, 'What chains so unworthy to hold you as those of a vain regret.' I endorse the sentiment, and will begin in earnest to-morrow. They are sweet, laughing eyes," he mused, "and might shine very brightly for some one. I have a rival in the shape of the great friend

who, with wonderful boldness, decks his lady with orange blossom. But she cares for no one yet—quite unbroken soil, something not often found.” Jack laughed unpleasantly. “I did not think I would be reduced to poaching, but it is the only cure I can think of, and forget her I will.”

“Promise me that you will always trust me whatever I do. Remember I have told you that I love you.” The words echoed through and through him. Lenore’s tones of entreaty rang in his ears.

It was easy enough to say forget, but he could not.

Of what use was it in Lenore to have told him that she loved him; her often-repeated assurances only made the course she had taken more utterly inexplicable. He went over it again—how, the morning after his meeting with her in the water-colour exhibition, he had presented himself at Prince’s Gate, not without qualms as to his reception by Sir James, but sure of Lenore herself; and how, on asking for an interview, the man-servant, commanding and gracious, had given him a note—“Sir James was particularly engaged with Lord Meredith, and had explained all to Mr. Hunt in the note.” Jack turned from the door, and hurriedly broke open the letter. There, in terms of extreme civility, Sir James informed Mr. Hunt that he had regretted being unable to favour him with an

interview. Circumstances had arisen which made it utterly impossible that the subject on which Mr. Hunt had spoken to his daughter the previous day could ever go any farther. His daughter knew and approved of the steps he was taking. Mr. Hunt would see at once that it would be extremely painful for Miss Fenton that they should again meet.

So this was the stone he received on asking for bread. He made up his mind that he and Lenore should meet again, and they had done so. The result is already known. Sir James had never told his daughter that Jack Hunt's dismissal had been conveyed to him in the way it was.

Jack's cigar was finished. He went into the house. A housemaid met him in the lobby unbarring the shutters, and letting in daylight. He must have smoked more than one cigar, he thought. The clock struck six, and they had reached home soon after four.





CHAPTER XV.

ETERNAL FRIENDSHIP.

Y^T was the afternoon of the following day. A general disinclination to exertion was making itself felt.

The men were lounging about in chairs with the newspapers. Nobody exactly knew what the three girls were doing.

It was a brilliant summer. July had just come in, bringing with it heat not often experienced in Britain. Everything was gasping in the sunshine ; not a breath of air abroad.

Reggie Mainwaring was just starting for the manor ; he was to find Grisel at the old meeting-place. Grisel was there already. She was sitting in the swing, lazily rocking herself to and fro by the aid of one small foot which just touched the ground. Her holland dress and shady hat made her look even more of a child than usual. Her thoughts were far away ; she was going over again

last night's experiences. Certainly she had enjoyed herself, far, far more than she could have believed possible.

Jack had come down in the morning determined to amuse himself with Grisel, yet somehow he had done nothing yet. It was too hot, or he was too lazy, he could not tell which.

He put down his newspaper at last, and dragged himself out of his easy chair.

"What is everybody going to do?" he asked.

"Fish," Tom answered; "but not for another hour or two yet. Will you come with me?"

"No, I don't think so. What does your mind give you to, Phil?"

"Exertion of no kind," yawned Phil. "I should think that a stroll and a cigar will about exhaust my powers. Where are your sisters, Tom?"

"Somewhere about. I dare say you will easily find them. Mainwaring usually turns up in the afternoon. I suppose he will be with them now."

"This will never do," Jack thought. "If I don't look sharp, I shall not have the ghost of a chance."

He sauntered into the garden and looked round. In the distance he saw the flutter of a lady's dress among the beech trees. He turned his steps in the direction. It was Grisel in the swing, and she was alone.

She did not hear his footstep on the turf, and turned with a start when she heard his voice.

"You have found a very shady retreat, Miss Romney. May I enjoy the cool also, and invade your solitude?"

"Certainly, if you like; but you will have it all to yourself soon. I am waiting for some one who will be here immediately."

"What a romantic trysting-place for any faithful swain! Who is the Corydon?"

"Think of calling Reggie a Corydon! And certainly I am no Thyrsis."

"You are waiting for Reggie, then. Very wrong of Reggie being unpunctual. Punish him by not waiting. Do come and show me some of your beauties."

"I wish I could," said Grisel, "but I promised."

"Very well; it would be bad policy in me to try and make you break your promise, for you would do the same to me another day. I will sit here and keep you company till the faithless Reggie appears."

"Oh, do! I shall like that!" Jack found a comfortable tree stump; he had made up his mind to begin his acquaintance at once.

"Do you remember your promise of last night?"

"That we were to be friends?" she asked.

"Yes. Do you still feel inclined to keep to it, Miss Romney? Has daylight made no difference, or will you really take me in hand?"

"Why should daylight make a difference? I am just as anxious now as I was last night. I want a real friend so much."

"You forget the faithless one."

"Reggie is different. We aren't like that. I say anything that comes uppermost to him."

"I wish you would say anything that comes uppermost to me. Do you know, Miss Romney, I wish you would treat me like Reggie? Scold me as you do him, that is what I want you to do."

"You would not like it," she said. "He doesn't at all. In fact, if anyone else said the same things to him, he would not stand it."

"Well, you have proved I am right. If he keeps his temper, so can I—in fact, far better; for a man is much more likely to keep his temper with a girl he has seen very little, and really likes, than with a girl whom he has treated as a sister all his life."

"Now you are growing sensible, Mr. Hunt. I thought I was never going to make you understand about Reggie and me, for he is so exactly like my brother that it makes things quite different."

There was silence for a few minutes, broken at

last by Grisel. "I wonder why it was you took me up, Mr. Hunt, and not either Sybil or Bryde, because I am afraid when you get to know me a little better you will be sorry."

"I think that I am best judge of that; but why?"

"Because you will find there is very little to know. Of course I may improve after I have gone out a little, but in the meanwhile I am a perfect ignoramus."

"And are Sybil and Bryde deep in this world's lore? They might give you hints. It is hardly fair, is it, that they should keep all their knowledge to themselves?"

"They do their best. But Aunt Griselda says that I will gain sense as I grow older; that such things must always be taught by experience."

"Aunt Griselda is a wise woman. And so you are going to keep your eyes open, and learn the lessons of experience. They are not always pleasant."

"I am very anxious to know all I ought to know, because everyone says I am such a child. Of course I am very sorry that I must give up all the fun. But I suppose I shall soon get into the way of being a woman, though it is odd at first. Do you think if I try very hard, and pick up all the scraps of information I can, and really am

quiet and self-possessed, that in a year after this I will pass tolerably well for grown up—not only come out, but grown up enough for people to care to speak to me? What do you think about it, Mr. Hunt, looking at it seriously, for I am so anxious about it?”

“Seriously, then, I think even now some people might care to speak to you.”

“To chatter, yes; but to converse, no. Aunt Griselda says that it is a great thing for a woman to be able to converse agreeably.”

“Your Aunt Griselda is your oracle. Are you named after her?”

“Oh no! she and I are both called after the same person—Griselda de Grey. It’s a long story, and a very sad one.” Grisel stopped short. “I wonder when the others are coming?”

“Are you getting tired, Miss Romney? Won’t you tell me about Griselda de Grey, and how you bear her name?”

“Have you been in what we call the four aunts gallery yet?”

“No; but if you like I will go at once, and having seen it, come back and hear its history.”

“Oh, it doesn’t signify. I will show it to you when we go in. There is an oak gallery at one end of the hall, and the panels are divided into four spaces so as to form frames for four large

pictures. They are filled with life-sized portraits of Dorothy, Sybil, Bridget, and Grisel, the daughters of my great-great-grandfather. I do not know what became of Sybil and Bryde, but Dorothy died, and that is why none of us are called Dorothy. Then Griselda, or Grisel, as she was called, had a strange story. She had her fortune told her once by a *spaewife*, and it was that she would never be married unless it were to change her name to that of Grey, and that for all generations of the Romneys everyone named Grisel must do the same. Poor Grisel was in love with some one else, but when Lord de Grey asked her father for her hand he said 'yes,' and so she married Lord de Grey and was very unhappy. I think it would have been better if she had remained unmarried, for the *spaewife* gave her that alternative; so you see Aunt Griselda has never married, because no one of the name of Grey ever turned up."

"But you don't believe in a *spaewife's* fable, do you?"

"Not exactly; still it would be odd if it happened to me."

"I don't think it will happen again; the third generation usually breaks the spell. And you know no one of the name of Grey?"

"Not yet," she answered, laughing; "but I have

not had much time. The nearest approach to it is Reggie. I always call him Le Gris."

"And Reggie is quite agreeable, I have no doubt. You are going to be released from your *tête-à-tête* at last ; I am afraid I hear voices."

"I am almost sorry. I have enjoyed our talk. It was very good of you to come and cheer my solitude. Reggie's mother must have detained him. His father suffers from gout, and late hours do not agree with him ; so after last night very likely he is ill, and Reggie must do all the business and letter-writing."

"What an exemplary son ! Yes, I was right ; we are to be disturbed."

Through the wood came Bryde, followed by Mr. Jerningham and Tom.

"So you are here, Grisel. I have been looking for you. Here are letters."

Bryde tossed the post-bag on the turf, and began dispensing its contents.

"What it is to be a man of business, Mr. Hunt. They are all for you. No, there is a newspaper for you, Mr. Jerningham, and a letter for Miss Griselda. It's from Aunt Sybil. What does she say ?"

Jack was buried in his various communications. Grisel's was a closely written sheet ; she did not at once answer her sister's question.

"I am left quite out in the cold," Bryde said, "for even Tom has received some kind of a missive."

"You shall have mine, Miss Romney," said Philip, as, unfolding his paper, he handed it to Bryde.

"Thank you. Now I will read you some extracts. I do so like to be usefully employed."

It was one of the well-known vehicles of information of which there are so many in the present day, dealing largely in the *on dits* of the upper ten thousand.

"‘We hear that a well-known prelate of our church,’" read Bryde, "‘has at last taken the fatal step. There must be rejoicing in Rome over another sinner that hath repented.’"

"That's not very interesting," said Tom. "Try again, Bryde."

"‘It's commonly reported in racing circles that the winner of the Oaks——’"

"Yes, that is better. Go ahead, Bryde!" Tom interrupted.

"I don't approve of horse-racing; so, if you wish for the information, you must read it for yourself afterwards."

"No other gossip, Miss Romney, that will not shock your principles? Give it to me, and I will look."

"No, no, Mr. Jerningham ; patience a moment. I may find something universally interesting. Yes, here is a conundrum for you all to solve ; some of you may be able to throw light on it.

"A noble earl of our acquaintance, who has travelled much, and is more especially known to our readers through his far-famed collection of arts, has at last determined to take unto himself a wife. His future father-in-law has catered well for his daughter. Money is scarce in these days, we know ; it will be a relief to his feelings that his son-in-law has plenty. A mail phaeton may be seen any day, with its pair of splendid roans, drawing up at a pleasant villa in Brighton, and the noble earl is seen, soon after, either taking his future countess or papa-in-law for a seaside airing.'"

Philip instinctively glanced at Jack Hunt. He might never have heard what was read, or perhaps his ideas did not jump to the conclusion Philip's had done.

"I will solve it for you soon," Grisel said. "Aunt Sybil wishes two of us to go down to Brighton next week to stay with them, and I shall look out for the roans and let you know the result."

"An idea has struck me," Bryde remarked.

"Do you remember the beautiful Miss Fenton we saw at the opera, Grisette? Mr. Jerningham told us then that she might marry the man beside her if she chose; and he was an earl, I think."

"I hope it is not true, I took such a fancy to her; she is the most beautiful woman I ever saw."

"When you are as old as I am, Grisette, my dear," said Tom, "you will have learnt one of this world's sad lessons, that appearances are often deceitful."

"Mr. Jerningham, what do you think? You know Miss Fenton; she is a friend of yours. Is not she too nice to marry a man old enough for her grandfather?"

"Yes, I know her, Miss Romney; and if she does marry Lord Meredith, I feel certain that it will be for some good reason."

Jack looked up from the letter he was reading; they thought he was not listening to what passed.

"Miss Fenton is going to marry Lord Meredith. I have it on the best authority. She told me so herself ten days ago."

Phil gave a low whistle of astonishment.

"There, Grisette, you see I am right," exclaimed Bryde, triumphantly; but Grisel had turned to Jack, and quick tears had come into her eyes.

"Oh! Mr. Hunt, why did you tell me? I did

admire her so, and she did not look as if she cared for Lord Meredith."

"You are a warm partisan, Miss Romney; a friend such as you are is worth having."

He was seated very near her, and no one heard the remark. Through the wood came the sound of whistling, followed soon after by Reggie and his two dogs.

"How comfortable you all look!" he said. "What are you talking about?"

He was going to seat himself among them, but Grisel interposed.

"Le Gris, if you are to row me up to the island, we must go. It is late already."

"Doesn't it bore you, La Grise? Don't come unless you wish it."

"Of course I wish it. I have been waiting for you here for an hour."

"I will verify Miss Romney's statement," Jack said, "and very dull she would have been if I had not been here to wile away the time."

"Come away, then, La Grise." The two passed out of the group.

"May I go on the river with you to-morrow, Miss Romney, as you would not show me its beauties to-day?" Jack made the above remark to Grisel just as she was leaving.

"Yes, willingly. I will not forget."

"Are you sure, La Grise, that you do not mind coming?" Reggie asked, as soon as they were out of earshot.

"I have been looking forward to it ever since last night; it is like old days. It is so jolly being at home again. I am happier than I can tell you."

"Because, child, I quite understand that you must have many more demands on your time now. You must always say 'no' if you do not wish to come."

"I promise," she said; "but 'yes' is what I want to say this afternoon."





CHAPTER XVI.

THE NEW LOVE AND THE OLD.

“SYBIL, do you know how long Mr. Hunt is going to remain here?”

Mr. Romney and his daughter were alone together in his study. Ten days had passed since the dance; Jack had only come for two. Mr. Romney made the two men very welcome, and time passed almost unconsciously.

“I cannot tell at all. Has it struck you that he has a reason in staying?”

“That was what I wanted to know about, Sybil. I thought perhaps I was fanciful, and yet——”

“She is very young, father, and it would be dreadfully hard to part with her so soon.”

“All the same, Syb, we must think of her happiness; you know I cannot last for ever. I am getting on now, and would like to see you all happily settled before I go. It is a lone thing for a woman, Sybil, to be in the world without some

good fellow to look after her ; and though I wish it had been the other end of the string that he had begun at, still your mother was no older than Grisel is now when I married her."

Sybil left the room in search of her sisters. There had been some talk of a riding party to visit some distant ruins, but nothing was definitely settled.

She found them together discussing plans, but unable to settle anything till she heard from their father.

"Mr. Hunt wishes so much to go to the old Abbey. I promised him we should do it if we could. You think we may go? Do say yes, Sybil, to please me."

"Will it please you very much, Grisette, if I do say yes? Will it be a great disappointment to Mr. Hunt to give up the plan?"

Sybil could not help glancing at Grisel, and saw the tell-tale colour come up into her face.

"We should all be disappointed, Sybil. Should not we, Bryde?"

"I shall answer for two of the party, Mr. Jerningham and myself, as we have laid a plan of coming home across the fields. He wants to see Ladybird take that water-leap. I told him what a capital huntress she would make."

"Now, Sybil, you see we must go. Remember,

our days are numbered. I heard Mr. Hunt saying something about a letter he received yesterday which takes him back to town immediately, so we had better make hay while the sun shines."

"Is Reggie to be one of the party?" asked Sybil.

"Not to-day," answered Grisel, "he said he might have an engagement. Did you hear his regiment was under orders for India? He only got warning ten days ago, but he forgot to tell me till yesterday. Lady Mainwaring is in despair, for, now Sir Roger is so often ill, Reggie does everything for her. He has not heard yet when they sail; but he says that his leave will probably be cut short, and he may have to join at a day's notice, and perhaps not be able to be here again."

"Poor Lady Mainwaring! How she will miss him!" Bryde said.

"More than anyone," answered Grisel. Tom's voice was heard outside. "I will let them know about this afternoon," she continued, and went into the garden. Bryde and Sybil looked at each other.

"Does it not seem strange that a day should pass without Le Gris being here!" said the former.

"Poor Le Gris," said Sybil. "He knows things are changed. I am glad his regiment is ordered to India."

So Jack's intentions were pretty well guessed at by all the family but Grisel herself, and it never entered her head. She was intensely happy, because everything around conduced to make her so. Mr. Hunt's constant attentions were not unnoticed by her; on the contrary, they added greatly to her enjoyment. It was such a perfectly new sensation to find her will law to some one so much wiser, cleverer, older than herself; and Jack had made good use of his time in his ten days' acquaintanceship.

Lenore's marriage with Lord Meredith had been formally announced several times among fashionable alliances; it was to take place early in autumn. "She seems to take a delight in the fact that everyone should know what a desirable thing she has done for herself" was Jack's unreasoning conclusion. How much he had built his hopes on something happening to put things right he did not even guess until the announcement came to his ears, and then the amount of hope which it forever crushed added greatly to his soreness in being such a fool as to care.

Grisel's irresistible loveableness was perfect balsam to his wounded feelings.

He thought her very charming that afternoon when, mounted on her "thoroughbred," she rode through the woods at his side. It was no humbug.

He had worked himself thoroughly into the conviction for the time being.

The ruins had been visited, and they were returning slowly homewards. They had formed into groups of three at first; Jack, Grisel, and Tom leading the way down the grassy bridle path, the other three following at some little distance; but Tom soon dropped behind—he was finding his position of third party not to his mind.

Grisel and Jack talked on; she was asking what he did in London—trying to pick up scraps of information, she laughingly remarked.

“It is all for the same great purpose of becoming a really well-informed woman. I think I am a promising pupil, Mr. Hunt. I have made copious notes of your words of wisdom; perhaps by the next time we meet, I may be able to impart information to you.”

“You may do that already,” he answered. “Where does this path lead to? Shall we explore?”

“Nowhere particular, only the dropping well; and if we go, the others will pass on without knowing.”

“Never mind the others; I dare say we might overtake them, and the path looks tempting.”

It was very narrow, only room for one at a time. They rode on in silence, Grisel leading. The well was not far from the road, they were soon beside

it ; a great grey rock, over which the water dripped incessantly into a deep, green pool, turning everything to fossil around.

"Now, Mr. Hunt, wish your wish quickly," Grisel exclaimed, "and do not tell me what it is, or you will not get it."

"I have wished," he said ; "have you?"

"No ; for I have no wish unfulfilled. Let us go."

They turned their horses down the path again, and joined the bridle path once more.

"Firefly has picked a stone, Mr. Hunt ; he is going quite lame." But there was no stone, the horse had evidently strained himself in their bit of rough riding.

They rode on slowly for a couple of miles ; presently Grisel halted.

"We are only a mile from home now. I am going to lead Firefly, riding makes me miserable."

"Let us change saddles," Jack said, "and I will lead your horse beside you."

"Yours will not carry a lady, and I do not mind walking."

"We shall walk together then," he said, and so they did. Through the trellis-work of boughs the sun streamed with long evening shadows. It lighted up Grisel's golden hair, and relieved the otherwise sombre colouring of the dainty figure in her faultless habit.

She walked along lightly, switching the heads of the flowers in the grass with her riding-whip.

"You are very silent to-day, Mr. Hunt," she said at last.

"I was thinking," he answered.

"Thinking of getting back to your work?"

"No; of leaving my pleasure behind me. I wonder if you have any idea how sorry I am to go."

"I should be broken-hearted leaving the country," she answered, "for a dingy town atmosphere."

"Town even is bearable if one has all one values there; but when I go, I shall leave what I most value behind."

"Not your diamond studs, surely; if so, leave them to me."

The gravity of his voice had startled her into flippancy. He looked at her and smiled, and then he stopped his horse. Grisel, involuntarily, also came to a standstill.

"Not my diamond studs, Miss Romney; they are not my most valuable possession. You shall have them if you like. What I most value is not mine yet. Cannot you guess what I mean?"

"How could I possibly! Tell me; and if it is anything we can give you, you shall have it."

"Grisel, have you no idea? It is yourself I want. Will you give *that* to me?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Hunt?"

"That I want you to be my wife, Grisette."

"But I should be such a child-wife, Mr. Hunt; and besides, I do not think I am in love with you."

"But that will come; and you don't dislike me, Grisel."

"Oh no, I like you very much indeed; better almost than anybody; but you would not wish me to marry you yet? I couldn't do it; no, certainly not yet. And besides, I think I had really better say no at once."

"But I will not take no. Look here, Grisette," he continued, taking her hands in his, "you said you would be my friend; and if I tell you I wish you to be something much more than friend, and that I shall be very miserable if you say no, will not you say yes? You need not marry me yet; and if you are sure you don't dislike me, but, on the contrary, like me a little, I am content."

"Would you be miserable? I should be sorry for you then. Well, if Papa and Sybil think I ought, I will say yes!"

"Thank you, Grisette. Now, just say after me, 'Jack, I will be your wife,' and that is all."

She hesitated a moment; but he held both of her hands very firm in his, and the determination of his manner awed her. Then she said the words he had dictated—

"Jack, I will be your wife!" and he stooped down and kissed her lightly on the lips.

About an hour afterwards, a gentle knock came at Sybil's door, and Grisel entered, still attired in her riding habit. "Are you busy, Sybil dear; or may I talk to you a little?"

"Not at all busy, La Grise. What is it you are going to tell me? May I guess?"

Sybil was sitting in a low chair reading, and Grisel sat down on a stool beside her.

"Don't guess," she exclaimed, turning away her face from Sybil's questioning gaze. "Do you think I have done right?"

"If I may not guess, how am I to tell, Grisette? Some one who is going away to-morrow has asked you a question, and you have said yes!"

"Not exactly; I told him that I must ask you and Papa first. Do you think I ought to say yes? He says—I mean Mr. Hunt—that he will be very miserable if I say no; and so I almost promised; in fact, I think I did quite promise; but I could unsay it if you think I am too young, or that he would be disappointed in me afterwards; only he said he would be very unhappy, so I could hardly help it."

"Would you be very unhappy? That is what you must think, Grisette dear."

"I like him very much, and if I had drawn lots,

I think I should have been sorry if it had come no!"

"I think you were right, then, darling ; but what a baby you are to run away from us all."

"I am not going to run away—for ages. I told Mr. Hunt so. I would much rather never see him again than that."

"Very well, Grisette ; but you must run away now, it is close to dinner-time."

Grisel held up her mouth for a kiss before rising to her feet. "Sybil dear, will you tell Papa?" she said.

"So, Miss Griselda, you have had a nice afternoon's work," said her father when she came into the room at dinner-time. "God bless you, child ! May you be as happy as your mother and I were!"

That was all that passed between father and daughter.

Sybil was alone that evening, or, at least, nearly so ; her father was in the room, but he had dropped fast asleep. The rest of the party were in the garden, Jack had claimed Grisel, and the other three were sitting on the terrace, and their laughter reached Sybil, where she sat in the broad window-seat with her head resting against the shutter. She was sad that night. Grisel's happiness had stirred old memories—had taken her back to the time when she was Grisel's age, and a bright future was hers ; but the future never came, for death

stepped in, and Sybil took to her easel, and was not at all unhappy. Her sisters knew nothing of it, they had been in the schoolroom then; it was far easier for her to live her life with her secret safe than if the household had known it. There was a sound of a footstep on the gravel; it was getting too dusk to distinguish faces, but the voice was Reggie Mainwaring's.

"Sybil, are you alone? May I come in? I have come to say good-bye."

"You are not really going for good? It is very sudden. How we shall miss you!"

"Will you, Sybil? Thank you so much for saying it. I only got my orders this morning, and have been so busy all day that I could not come earlier; but it was impossible to leave without wishing you all good-bye. I start to-morrow morning."

"Reggie, I must tell you something."

"You needn't, Sybil. I saw them in the garden."

"Dear old Le Gris, may I say how sorry I am?"

"Is she happy, Sybil? Is he worthy of her? If so, the rest is of no consequence."

"What I know of him I like," she answered; "but I can hardly understand it yet; it has been all so sudden."

There was silence for a few minutes. Reggie roused himself at last.

"I must say good-bye to them all, Sybil. I hardly expect to be back before I sail."

They were soon gathered round, all except Grisel and Jack. Mr. Romney woke with a start, and wrung Reggie's hand warmly. Everyone asked questions at the same time, and got no answers. The noise was better far than a quiet good-bye. Sybil's was the last hand-shake.

"I am going to the garden," Reggie said. "I must see her before I go."

So he left the merry family party, and went to face the ghost of his happiness.

He had no difficulty in finding them—they were slowly wending their way home. Grisel was laughing and chattering. They, somehow, did not look like lovers who had just arrived at a knowledge of their own minds. Jack saw Reggie first; Grisel was engrossed with her argument.

"Here is your dear Le Gris, Grisette. What has brought him at this hour?"

Grisel started. "Oh, Reggie," she said, springing forward; "you have never come to say good-bye?"

"Yes, La Grise. I start to-morrow morning. My departure is sudden, is it not?"

Something in Reggie's face and the tone of his voice made Jack Hunt turn away. He was sorry for him, now that it was too late. He left them, and went into the house.

"How shall I ever get on without you, Le Gris? What a shame it is to give you such short notice."

"Will you miss me, La Grise? I thought I was to congratulate you. Your time will be fully employed."

"You mean that I am engaged to Mr. Hunt? But I shall miss you just as much. I shall hardly know myself without you." The tears were in her eyes, and her voice trembled, but she recovered herself. "How long shall you be away, Reggie? I shall keep my notch-stick, as in the old days."

"Three or four years, probably. You will be an old married woman when I come back."

"Don't. I have not quite given my promise yet, and, at any rate, it will not be for years. Will you write to me, Reggie, and I will write to you? You will like to hear about us now and then."

"Yes, child, your letters will be very welcome. But I must go now; I promised my mother to be home again soon."

"Good-bye, dear Le Gris. Remember to write to me."

"God bless you, my queen! May you be very happy!"

Grisel slipped away to her own room and cried like a child. Her dear old playmate was gone. What would she do?



CHAPTER XVII.

FREE.

A CHARMING villa in a fashionable part of Brighton, with stables and coach-house attached. Such was the two elderly Miss Romneys' summer quarters.

It was evening. The sisters had just finished their six o'clock dinner, and Miss Sybil felt much inclined to have a nap before tea. She was a delicate-looking old lady of seventy-five, and had long ago made over the reins of government completely to Miss Griselda, twenty years her junior. The latter was well preserved for her age, and prided herself much on the fact. She was not at all juvenile; on the contrary, she usually dressed herself in a much more elderly fashion than her years warranted. She often told her nieces that she had found it to her advantage. It makes one look younger, not older, she said. As before said, Miss Romney wanted to sleep, but unfortunately

Miss Griselda wanted to talk, and as she usually got her own way, Miss Romney opened her elderly eyes and prepared to listen.

"I am not sure that Thomas has done right in letting such a child as Grisel engage herself to Mr. Hunt."

"I suppose he knows best, my dear. She is very young, certainly, but it is a fault which will improve."

"Of course ; common sense tells one that. But if she had been my child I should have said, 'Wait a little, Grisel, till you know your own mind better, and are quite certain that Mr. Hunt is the right man.' She knows nothing of him. Ten days' acquaintance ! I think the haste with which it has been arranged is shocking."

"From all one hears, he must be a very desirable young man—so quiet and steady. It is a great thing in these days, when the usual accounts are so very different."

"Well, we shall be able to judge for ourselves soon, I suppose," Miss Griselda said. "Grisel will be here to-morrow, and Mr. Hunt will have to come down in a few days and be introduced to us."

"Dear me ! it never struck me in that light. A young man in the house ! How very disagreeable ! How shall we manage, Griselda, with no one but

the maids to do anything? I fear he would find it very uncomfortable."

"Nonsense, Sybil; it will be perfectly easy. Leave all arrangements to me. And it is certainly the thing which ought to be done."

Miss Griselda paused. Her sister thought she was done. She folded her small, soft hands with the lace frills which fell over them, and closed her eyes.

"You needn't go to sleep yet, for there is another subject I wish to discuss with you, my dear Sybil. Not that there need be any discussion. Still it is as well you should hear what I was thinking of doing."

"You always do right. Just act on your own responsibility. I shall be quite satisfied."

"How do you know that, when you have not heard what I wish to do? I am going to call on that old Sir James Fenton, who has taken the villa next ours. They are strangers here. He has one nice-looking daughter. I think, being old residents, we ought to do it. It would be kind; and, besides, she will be a companion for the girls when they come."

"I thought you told me yesterday that Miss Fenton was going to be married. Will she care for new acquaintances, when she has probably much to attend to?"

"My dear Sybil, I consider we ought certainly

to call. It will make it much pleasanter for her to know some ladies in Brighton. I shall go to-morrow."

"Very well, my dear, you know best."

Miss Romney was at liberty to sleep now; her regular breathing soon told that she had taken advantage of her opportunities.

So next afternoon the call was made. The mail phaeton and roans had taken Sir James for a drive, and Lenore was alone at home.

"Such an extremely good-looking girl I found," Miss Griselda said, in recounting her experiences to her sister. "Very much above the average, I should say—so quiet and self-possessed. I congratulated her on her marriage, and asked her if she had known Lord Meredith for long. She took the congratulations very quietly, and said he was an old friend of her father's. Really, I am so glad I called. Such a particularly good companion for Grisel."

Lenore did not connect the name of Romney with the family that Mr. Jerningham had pointed out to her at the opera. That they could be any possible interest to her never entered her head. She was glad the old lady had called; she felt very dull and lonely. To become acquainted with anyone and to mix in their society, would always be an escape from her own thoughts.

She had been engaged to Lord Meredith for more than a fortnight. She had gone through the whole thing with but a dim consciousness of what she was doing. That it was the only path open to her had so impressed itself on her mind, that all interest in her future was dead. When Lord Meredith pressed for a speedy union she was willing, anything better than this fatal inaction. As Lady Meredith, she would have her round of duties to fulfil.

So the marriage was fixed for the first week in August, and they were going abroad immediately afterwards. Sir James was going up to London after parting with his daughter. He had secured rooms near his club, and looked forward to his bachelor existence with no small amount of pleasure.

Besides this, his more pressing money matters being off his mind, he relapsed into his easy-going selfishness. He considered he had done well, both for himself and Lenore. He did not trouble to look below the surface of his daughter's happiness, and assured himself comfortably that all was right.

Lord Meredith, too, was content. Lenore respected him; was intensely sorry for him; knew that she could only give him gilding for fine gold; and he, having until the time of his engagement

lived a loveless life, was thankful for the baser metal—it looked as well. As yet he knew no difference. Sir James had dwelt so much on the fact that he must not expect too much at first, that the slightest consideration on Lenore's part, wrung from her out of pity for the man, was hailed by him with delight. He had taken rooms in a neighbouring hotel, that he might be near to the Fentons.

So Lenore went through her daily acting, and tried to rouse herself from the apathy which was steadily taking possession of her.

She and her father were sitting at dinner together the evening after Miss Griselda's visit. She was doing her best to make conversation, but it flagged at times. Her father was overtired with his drive.

"Should I return Miss Romney's visit at once, Papa? I think I had better go to-morrow, after her kindness in coming."

Sir James looked up sharply.

"No, not to-morrow," he said; "you will be required at home. Lord Meredith has appointed Mr. Harvey to meet him here to draw up the settlements, and you had better not be out of the way, in case you are wanted."

Lenore made no answer, but played with her knife and fork. It was a habit she had acquired

of late ; her appetite was gone. Sir James's, with the weight off his mind, had steadily increased.

"You seem to take no interest in the settlements; they might be for anyone else but yourself. Meredith has been most liberal ; he has——"

"Shall I ring and have the things cleared away, Papa?" Lenore had risen from the table in the middle of her father's remark. "You are ready, are you not?"

"No, I am not ready. I cannot tell you all the arrangements with a man-servant pottering about the room. You seem to be in a desperate hurry."

"I did not mean to hurry you, Papa ; but you surely must know that any arrangements, as you call them, must be extremely painful for me to hear. Cannot you understand this, and so leave me in ignorance about it all? So long as you are comfortably provided for, the rest matters little to me."

"You are very ridiculous, Lenore. You have such high-flown sentiments about money matters ; but, believe me, you will find that humanity cannot exist on air, and a large establishment is not fed for nothing."

Sir James was working himself up into one of his tempers. Lenore rose from the table, and went to the window. The sea lay blue and smiling before her ; its calmness fretted her.

Everything around seemed indifferent to her misery. Would nothing come and break the weary monotony of the hours, and rouse her from her lethargy?

Mechanically she noted what was going on outside—a carriage stop at the Romneys' villa—two girls and a maid jump out—luggage unpiled and taken after them into the house. "Dear me, what a noise they make; they must have let a box fall!" Then a groan. She was roused at last; the monotony was broken. Her father lay on the floor before her, as she thought, dead.

In a moment she was beside him, trying to raise him from the ground, but her strength was not sufficient. Sir James, at all times a heavily-made man, was doubly so now in his state of unconsciousness. After the first moment of uncertainty, Lenore saw he was not dead. He breathed; he might still live.

The servants came in answer to her pull at the bell—no want of willing hands to do what could be done. Sir James was removed to his room. The physicians arrived. Lenore waited in stony calmness for the result.

"Is there any hope?" she asked, as the doctor entered the room, having just left Sir James. "Tell me exactly the state of the case."

"My dear young lady, while there is life there is

hope, we know. You must keep yourself calm. You will need all your strength. Your father has had a very severe paralytic shock; his recovery, even at the best, must be a long and tedious one."

"My grandfather died of paralysis. The second shock followed the first within twenty-four hours."

"It is sometimes the case, but by no means invariably. We must trust that your father has strength of constitution to rally. I will send a nurse at once. But what friends have you? You must not be alone. Forgive me for asking, but do I speak to the young lady to whom Lord Meredith is engaged? If so, ought not he to be informed of what has occurred?"

"Oh no—not to-night. Let me have one night alone with my father. I can see no one—not even Lord Meredith."

"Very well, very well; you are quite right. Only you must take care of yourself, or I shall have to interfere. I shall give all directions to the nurse, but I will come again myself this evening when I have completed my rounds."

Lenore took up her station at her father's bed, and the hours of the night wore on. The nurse came, and fell at once naturally into her place. Then Dr. G. paid his second visit. There was no change in the patient's condition. He was hardly conscious; they did not think he knew anyone.

After that, some one gave Lenore a cup of tea, and stood by while she drank it. A little later, she consented to lie down on a sofa in her father's room, but no sleep came to her weary, burning eyes. Her head was in a whirl. She tried to arrange her ideas, to go over to herself the events of the evening. By degrees her thoughts arranged themselves into a circle, and with weary monotony went round and round ; and then she slept.

She must have been asleep for more than an hour. She awoke with a start. The nurse had, in administering nourishment to her patient, made some slight sound sufficient to rouse such light sleep. She rose at once to her feet and went towards the bed. The grey of early dawn was forcing its way through the shutters, and fell in a streak of ghostly white across the sheets and figure of her father.

The nurse went forward and partly opened the shutter. Sir James turned his head. He was conscious, and a smile came over his features as he recognised Lenore. He tried to raise one poor paralysed hand as it lay helpless, but could not. Lenore bent and kissed it tenderly, and the bright smile again flitted across his face. His mouth tried to frame some word, but the power of speech was gone. Lenore bent her ear to listen. She thought she heard her own name whispered ; but

consciousness departed again. He moved uneasily, and Lenore drew back to let the nurse take her place. It was well ; a moment after, a second stroke had succeeded the first, and Sir James was dead.

Lenore sank on her knees beside the bed. "Why was not I taken and he left?" she exclaimed in the bitterness of her spirit. "Oh! to be lying at rest also, and all this weary daily life done with!"

After that, she was silent. She remained with her face buried in her hands for some little while. When she rose from her knees she was perfectly calm.

She gave all orders herself, and telegraphed for her uncle, her only near relative ; besides sending word to Lord Meredith of what had occurred. Then she went to her own room, and the servants heard the key turn in the lock.

The news reached Lord Meredith just as he was sitting down to breakfast ; he left it untasted and hurried off to Lenore. "We must be married immediately after the funeral," he thought. "I am her natural protector now." When he arrived at the house, Lenore's maid met him. Her mistress was sorry she could not see him. She would be very much obliged if Lord Meredith would make all necessary arrangements for the funeral, and write to Mr. Harvey, the only lawyer her father

had ever employed. Lord Meredith turned away disappointed. He had hoped to see her, to be the only one with her in her sorrow; but he told himself it was natural, and was thankful he was there to take all trouble off her shoulders.

The news reached another breakfast table. Miss Griselda and her two nieces were just sitting down, when the maid came in and told the piece of Brighton gossip.

Sir James Fenton, who lived in the next villa, was dead. It had been very sudden, and everyone was talking about it.

"My dears, what an awful warning, and it might have been any of us! And his poor daughter, too, with no one to do anything for her. Lord Meredith will make all the funeral arrangements, but who is to help her with her mourning? I really think I shall offer to make myself useful."

"Perhaps it would be kind," said Bryde. "Only, if I were Miss Fenton, I would rather you didn't."

Grisel said nothing. She could not trust herself to speak; her eyes were full of tears, so she did not raise them. "It might just as easily have been Papa," she thought. "How I wish I knew Miss Fenton, and could go to her! I almost hope Mr. Hunt won't come till to-morrow. I don't feel inclined to be happy when only next door she is so sad."

Miss Griselda fulfilled her intention of offering her services, but a message came back that Miss Fenton was much obliged for the kindness, but her maid was doing everything for her.

The news was of interest in one more direction, but it only reached its destination the following day.

Jack Hunt was just preparing to go down to Brighton, to be introduced to his two future aunts-in-law. He was busy, and it was inconvenient. However, something must be sacrificed for his lady, and it would not be unpleasant to look again into her laughing eyes, though at times he wished the eyes would speak of something else besides mischief and love of life. He had seen them thoughtful also. They were for ever changing; it was one of her greatest charms. But Jack knew he had no more power to bring the love-light into them than any one of her many friends.

He had his preparations for departure completed, and took up the *Times* for the few spare moments before starting. The questions of the day engrossed his attention. Stirring events were filling the newspaper columns. Just on laying down the paper, he glanced at the obituary :—

“ At Brighton, very suddenly, Sir James Fenton, Bart., K.C.B.”

He dropped the paper from his hand. A thousand ideas crowded to his brain. To go to Lenore at once was his first impulse. That Lord Meredith was there already, and he would only be in the way, came close upon the thought—followed by the remembrance that he was no more his own master; there was Grisel. Too late now to undo all the past fortnight. He was in honour bound to another woman. He had been a fool, he had wrecked his own happiness, and it was too late. The past could not be undone.

What presented itself to him only as a vague idea at first was fast settling into conviction—that had he now been free to go to her, Lenore would have come to him at once; it was only her father that, until this moment, had come between them. He had been absolutely blind not to see all this before. The confusion of ideas was getting oppressive. If only——

But there is always an *if*. If he did not start at once, he would miss the express for Brighton, and Grisel would be disappointed. Besides, he hardly owned to himself there was another besides Grisel at Brighton.



CHAPTER XVIII.

FOR THE BEST.

FIVE days had passed. It was the morning after the funeral, and Lenore was alone. She was looking thin and worn, and pressed her hand wearily to her head, as if it pained her.

She sat at the table writing. Her uncle, who had arrived the day after her father's death, was still with her. He had appointed Mr. Harvey to meet him that morning. He wished to settle everything before returning home, and Lenore was waiting for the business interview. Sir James's desk stood open on the table; its contents were scattered about; piles of old letters, a daguerreotype of Lady Fenton, indiarubber bands, broken ends of sealing wax, wafers, and several pen-wipers lying in motley confusion around.

Mr. John Fenton was out; he had gone in answer to a summons from Lord Meredith. Before the interview was over, he had been made fully

aware of his Lordship's wishes. The marriage must be without any delay. The Reesdale estates would not long be burdened.

So Mr. John Fenton returned to Lenore, delighted with the man she was about to marry.

"You must be married from our house, Lenore," he said, after some conversation. "Your aunt will be charmed to make your acquaintance. Whenever you can make up your mind to leave this place, you must come direct to us, and stay with us till you have got all you need. A countess must go well provided to her future home," he added, with a laugh. He was rather afraid of Lenore's continued reserve.

Mr. Harvey was announced. The interview was a painful one. Sir James's affairs were in a most involved state; quite setting aside the debt to Lord Meredith, there were liabilities of a minor character, which, when added together, made a tolerably formidable whole.

When everything was cleared off, there would be nothing left for Lenore. "Mercifully, she will not need it," was her uncle's comment.

"There is £100 a-year to be paid from Reesdale, as I understand," Mr. Harvey asked, "as long as Miss Fenton remains unmarried?"

"You are right, Mr. Harvey. That will keep you in pin-money, my dear; but you must consider

your home with your aunt and myself for the next few weeks."

"Do I understand right," asked Lenore, "that I really am entitled to £100 a-year, to be paid until my marriage?"

"Quite right. It is a provision of a limited nature, made in your grandfather's will. I always thought that your father was hardly used, but such the old gentleman arranged, and his sudden death made alteration of the will an impossibility."

"I am not absolutely dependent then?" she said, with a sigh of relief.

"Not absolutely; yet I doubt whether £100 will go far in a trousseau, such as you young ladies of the present day think proper."

Mr. Harvey gave a low bow of assent; he was inclined to take Mr. Fenton's pleasantry in earnest. Ladies' ideas were certainly getting beyond all bounds. Lenore paid no heed to her uncle's attempt at humour.

"It was not of how far it would go in furnishing me with a suitable trousseau that I was thinking—my marriage with Lord Meredith must be postponed in the meanwhile—but of how far it would go towards keeping me independent. My plans are as yet completely unformed; when I have given them some thought, I will consult with you."

"My dear niece, any plans that you propose making are, of course, subject to Lord Meredith's wishes. He will be a better advocate of his own cause than I possibly can be. I will leave him to talk over your future with you. Mr. Harvey, we may go now. I do not think we need trouble Miss Fenton with all the minor details and settlements."

The two men left the room. Lenore returned the miscellaneous collection to her father's desk; it must all be destroyed sooner or later, but she had not time that day. She longed to breathe the air, and to get away by herself. She hurriedly prepared for walking, and left the house. She walked fast, and soon left fashionable Brighton behind her; houses were becoming more scattered—there was not so much chance of recognition. She threw back her heavy *crêpe* veil with a sigh of relief. She felt stifled.

She had much to think over and arrange within the next few hours. Lord Meredith was coming in the evening. She knew that the purport of his visit was to try and induce her to settle an early date for their marriage.

Her mind was in a chaos. Would it not be better to tell Lord Meredith the truth at once? Would it not be dealing more fairly and honestly with him? It would be a present pain, instead of

future disappointment; yet she shrank from inflicting the wound which must come from herself. The last week had shown much of the higher side of Lord Meredith's character; his quiet, unobtrusive watchfulness, his constant thought for her, that she might in every way be spared pain and trouble; his absolute unselfishness—a virtue so rarely seen in man.

Her arguments to herself might or might not be valid, they all came from one passionate longing to be free.

Till her talk with her uncle she had believed herself entirely dependent. Now she knew she was not. £100 a year would keep her from starvation; how short a way it would go she had no idea; she was absolutely ignorant of pounds, shillings, and pence.

And if free, what then?

Would the old days come back? or would her lover turn from her, judging of her love by her outward actions? He must by this time have heard of her father's death. Was he thinking of her—longing to be with her?

She had certainly no right to expect it, when, without explanation, she had parted from him, and immediately afterwards he must have heard of her formal engagement. And yet—— She relapsed into a train of thought, leading from past events

into a possible bright future. She had not determined on what she would do; she dismissed it from her mind, and her step grew more buoyant as she walked—a spark of hope had been lighted—the slightest breath would fan it into flame or extinguish it.

The sunshine and the beauty of the summer afternoon had tempted others besides Lenore from the house. Along the hedge-lined path a man and girl were coming; she had her arm linked in his, and was talking gaily. It was such a glorious day, Grisel was enjoying her walk; she did not notice Jack's abstracted manner.

He was thinking of Lenore, dreading and yet longing to see her. He had been at Brighton for nearly a week, and all that time they had never met, although he had watched closely the adjoining villa. To what good purpose would it tend if they did meet he could not tell; he was ready to do almost anything; the constant watching and disappointment of the previous days had increased the longing to meet her, to speak to her once again, tenfold.

And so the meeting so ardently longed for on both sides took place.

It was but a country cart-track they were following, not room almost for more than two at once. Suddenly, on rounding a corner, they met

a figure dressed in deep mourning. Lenore was walking with her eyes bent on the ground, and did not notice them until she was close to them. Then she raised her head, and for a moment thought she had lost her reason. Could it possibly be Jack Hunt, or was it some horrible delusion? Her face must have expressed the misery of the moment.

"Lenore!" broke from Jack's lips before he was aware that he spoke.

The sound of his voice proving it was in truth her lover, recalled Lenore to herself. She gave one glance of intense scorn and surprise, bowed haughtily, and passed on. Grisel looked from the one to the other—she could not understand it.

"You never told me before that you knew Miss Fenton so well, Mr. Hunt. You must have been very great friends before you would call her by her name."

"Did I call her by her name, Grisette? We were once great friends; it must have slipped out accidentally, as you see for yourself we are friends no longer. Miss Fenton would have withered me with her glance if she could."

Grisel was satisfied; she supposed Jack had had many friendships before he met her, and this was one of them. They walked on in silence for some

little time ; Jack's ideas did not tend to conversation.

"I wonder where Reggie is now, Mr. Hunt ? They were to sail two days ago."

"Do you remember what I told you yesterday, Grisette, that I would never answer any of your questions until you learnt to call me something else than Mr. Hunt ?"

"I always forget. I am so sorry ; but it feels so odd to call you Jack. But I'll try very hard ; so, Jack, please answer me now."

"What was it you asked about, Grisette ?"

"About Le Gris. Nothing of much consequence, only I wish you to speak, and not to be so very silent. How am I ever to glean words of wisdom from lips that say nothing ?"

He was betrayed into a smile ; she was such a child. "What shall I talk about, Grisette ?"

"Whatever you think I know least about. I am willing to try and improve myself in any direction."

Small talk occupied the end of their walk. It was useless to brood over the inevitable, Jack felt ; besides, he was not going to be such a fool as to care for Lenore, when it was a patent fact that all her interest in him was dead.

Meanwhile, Lenore went home, wounded love and pride striving for mastery. It had been a grievously cruel awakening, but she told herself

she was thankful that she had faced the worst. She bathed her burning face, and stood at the window, that the breeze might fan her throbbing temples ; then she went downstairs to her solitary dinner.

It was about eight o'clock when Lord Meredith was announced. She had not seen him at all that day. She rose to greet him, and her manner was a shade more cordial than usual.

"I am to tell you from your uncle," he said, "that he will be here later in the evening. We have been busy with Mr. Harvey until the last moment, hence my delay in being here. Your uncle had to put up his things, as he leaves by the early train."

"How can I ever thank you for all the trouble you have taken with my dear father's affairs? Believe me, I am grateful."

"I was going to say that thanks should not be mentioned between us, Lenore. But you *can* thank me, child. By this time you must know what my most anxious wish is. I do not want to hurry you ; but surely it would be far better if you could consent to our speedy marriage."

"It seems so terribly soon, after all that has happened. Don't you think it would be better to wait just for a little?"

"I sympathise most sincerely with your hesita-

tion ; still, until you are my wife, I cannot care for your interests, in fact have not the right to do so, in the same way."

She was very hard pressed on all points. What could she do ? She was homeless, friendless, loveless—how entirely so, she had only learnt that afternoon. Here was a home, love, position, everything lying at her feet. Would she refuse them all because she could not give back equal weight ? Was not this a quixotic mistake ? and if it must in the end come to this, would waiting make any difference ?

Lord Meredith waited patiently for his answer. He noted the pallor of her cheeks—the blue veins showing so plainly in delicate tracery on her temples ; he longed to strew her path with every happiness and comfort. She was so young to have to be left alone.

"Cannot you consent?" he asked at length, doubtfully. "If so, I must wait."

Lenore was sitting at a low table, her face buried in her hands. Lord Meredith was standing in the oriel window, watching her anxiously. She raised her head at length, and rose from her seat ; she went up to where he was standing.

"I think you are right, Fred. I am willing that our marriage should be when you think best."

"God bless you, Lenore ! May you never repent

this decision!" He took her in his arms and kissed her fondly; it was the first time she had called him by his name. How seldom he had ever kissed her struck her now with compunction. She had certainly never allowed him to treat her as her future husband.

Mr. Fenton came in soon after, and was much relieved that his niece had been brought to hear reason. He sat up till late. When he took his departure, it was with the understanding that the marriage should take place with as little delay as possible. Lenore was to follow her uncle home the following week.

It was a proud day for Mr. Fenton when, as nearest male relative, he gave her away for "better and worse," and all the other *pros* and *cons* of the wedding service.

A very quiet marriage with no one present, and the Merediths went abroad immediately afterwards. No fuss, no ceremony for watching reporters.

It was the simple announcement that met the eye of Jack Hunt, as one morning he read the daily paper, about a month after Sir James Fenton's death.



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